

JADAVPUR
JOURNAL OF
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

46

2008-2009

Special Issue

Dalit Narratives
and
The Testimonial Genre
in India

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JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
CALCUTTA

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1964-82 : Naresh Guha
1983-95 : Amiya Dev
1995-2006 : Swapan Majumdar

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Price : Rs. 50.00 / \$ 7.00

Published by Pradip Kumar Ghosh, Registrar, Jadavpur University,
Calcutta 700 032 and printed by Technoprint,
7 Srishtidhar Dutta Lane, Calcutta 700 006

ISSN 048-1143

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Most of the essays in this volume were originally presented at the symposium *Living To Tell Their Tale: Testimonio as Subaltern Voice In India and Latin America*, organized by the Center for Spanish and Latin American Studies Jamia Milia Islamia, N. Delhi, on 23-24 March, 2007. Sonya Surabhi Gupta, Professor and Director of the Center, first brought up the idea that a selection of papers from the symposium be published in the JCT. The proposal was gladly accepted by this editorial board in the interests of facilitating further research in comparative studies of Latin American and Indian literatures. Francesca Denegri is a Visiting Professor at the Department of Social Sciences, Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru, Lima. Vijaya Venkataraman is an Associate Professor in Spanish at the Department of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of Delhi. Raj Kumar is an Associate Professor at the Department of English, University of Delhi, and K Satyanarayana an Associate Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies, EFL University, Hyderabad. Sayantan Dasgupta, our colleague in the Department of Comparative Literature, and Abhishek Mitra, a Research Fellow, also in this department, were invited to write for this volume after the symposium. The reviews are by Nilanjana Bhattacharya, Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Department of English, Viswabharati, Santiniketan, and Debabrata Bagui, currently a Ph.D scholar of Comparative Literature and English at Jadavpur University.

INTRODUCTION
THE *TESTIMONIO* IN LATIN AMERICA AND INDIA:
CRITICAL CONTESTATIONS OF THE COLLECTIVE VOICE

The Debate about a "New" Genre in India

While scholarship continues to privilege lettered discourse over narrated experience, contemporary political struggles of marginalized groups, and their perspectives, often narrated orally, have thrown up new challenges to what passes as "knowledge." They are widely represented in the genre that is now well established in Latin America as the *testimonio*.¹ A considerable number of oral narratives and testimonies of marginalized groups, specially women – prisoners, Dalits and other political activists – that have been documented and published in India too in the last four decades,² are now challenging the bastions of lettered knowledge from alternative epistemological grounds.

As a crucial site for the generation of collective and oppositional consciousness, the *testimonio* foregrounds a critique of oppressive state rule through the political practice of recording historical memory and eye-witness accounts. And it is as much personal testimony as it is an unsettling testament to history. In the last two and a half decades there have been severe backlashes against *testimonios*, as in the case of the Mayan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú,³ that point to a need for a constant and renewed evaluation of the means and politics of knowledge production in mainstream academia, even in its self-consciously progressive fields. Critical questions that now need to be addressed in scholarship are: How do those of us who are in dialogue with the narrated experience of marginalized groups approach cross-cultural barriers? How do we deal with the differences

in the very ways in which knowledge is accrued, constructed, and also gendered in different cultures? What are our frameworks of understanding and what our blind spots or internal hierarchies? How do we comprehend the ethical and epistemological underpinnings of such processes of sharing knowledge — or of refusals to do so — across cultures?

If we are to take seriously the challenges of democratizing knowledge, and of bridging the local and the global, then we have to cultivate a sensitivity to our modes of signification across cultures. And since communication across cultures is discursive, and couched largely in narrative, this calls for the cultivation of sensitivity to the *situated* structuring and functioning of narratives, and of course the *located* subjectivities they express. Such work demands a comparative literary methodology, which implies then that not only is this a task central to the enterprise of Comparative Literature, but even more so that the activity of Comparative Literature is critical for the purpose of democratizing the bastions of academic knowledge.

One of the often posed questions about the *testimonio* is how does one distinguish it from the “genres” of oral narrative, oral history, life story or autobiography. The most general term of these is the oral narrative, which refers to any sustained narrative communicated orally; oral history designates the broad category of orally-narrated history, which may include life narratives and even the *testimonio*, if the latter is narrated to an interviewer who then compiles the text, as was the case with Rigoberta Menchú, Domitilia Barrios and the Telengana women; and a life story centres on an individual life, as does the autobiography, and both evolve along the locus of the individual rather than a collective. The *testimonio* on the other hand, is a specific genre that represents eye-witness accounts of collective struggle that enact a critique of oppressive state rule. The *testimonio* may be written directly by the activist in struggle. Or it may be narrated orally by the activist, and be compiled by the interviewer who also functions as the editor of the text and who has so far, for most well known *testimonios*, been a person from another culture. In such cases the *testimonio*, in its very production, takes shape as a trans-cultural genre calling for a nuanced cross-cultural approach.

One of the first instances of Latin American influence on Indian women's writing was that of *Sandino's Daughters* and *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*, on the Stree Shakti Sangathan collective's *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telengana People's Struggle*, published in 1989.⁵ In the eighteen years from *We Were Making History* to *Living To Tell Their Tale: Testimonio as Subaltern Voice In India and Latin America*, the seminar organized by the Center for Spanish and Latin American Studies, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi, in 2007, there has clearly been a growing recognition of the need for a more suitable generic approach specially for the study of Dalit life narratives. This is also reflected in the pointed nomenclature of Sharmila Rege's important book, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*, published in 2006, and in Gopal Guru's questioning of Baby Kamble's narrative as an "autobiography", in his 2008 afterword to the English translation of the same text.⁶

At the abovementioned seminar, where most of the essays in this issue were first presented, there was a clear consensus on the need for a generic approach that would do justice to both the collective self and the contemporary activist and oppositional stance that informs Dalit narratives. A critical focus of discussion though, was regarding the naming of this nascent genre in India. Various suggestions were placed on record, including *gawaahi bayan*, *gawaahi qissa*, *saakshi sahitya*, echoing the chequered history of the naming of the novelistic genre in relation to the *dastan*, *kadambari*, *naval katha*, *upanyas* and so on in India. Another dimension to this debate also included the view that the original name, *testimonio*, be preserved, for if we could ultimately retain the Anglo-American term "novel" in India, does the reluctance to take on the Latin American "*testimonio*" not reflect a bias against acknowledging the literary interaction with Latin American influence? The ground reality of course is that in the same way as the novel developed in India, as much, and more, from the oral genres of the *panchalis* and the narratives of the *kathakars*, and from *charit sahitya*, as it did under the influence of the western novel, so too the narratives of the Telengana women and the Dalits have emerged more from local modes of orality; and those of Baby Kamble or Urmila Pawar and the

prison accounts of Jaya Mitra, Meenakshi Sen in the context of contemporary Indian conventions of writing than in direct response to the testimonial literature of Latin America. The point is thus not about the western or Latin American or Indian source of nomenclature but about the consensus on the nature of the conventions of the genre in a specific culture, and the horizons of expectation a particular generic naming may set up. For a genre frames the reader's interpretation of a text; and the specific conventions of the genre draw readers into identifying its significant features, as distinct from others, that are likely to be operative in the text.

One distinguishing feature of the testimonial genre is that it is structured by the experience of a collective involved in active struggle, and it is the collective voice of the community that informs the text through the voice of the narrator. As opposed to the largely individualist locus of the autobiography, the locus of the *testimonio* is thus the trajectory of a collective. (Beverley; Sommer) The other defining feature of the *testimonio* is that it communicates, centrally, the political perception of a marginalized community — it is a history from below narrated by a participant (Beverley, Gusdorf, Sommer 1988) who functions as a Gramscian “organic intellectual”, laying out a critical interpretive history — which could be just a contemporary history — of her/his community, and also communicates a combined vision for the future, the collective political imperative of the community. Thus the generic conventions of the *testimonio* urge the reader to identify the collective voice, the political standpoint of the community in struggle — through a sensitivity to both the articulations as well as the silences of the participants — and the trajectory of the community as opposed to that of the individual in a novel or autobiography, thus facilitating thoughtful engagement with these aspects of the narrative.

Approaching the 'Testimonio in India — Conceptual and Political Issues

Three essays in this collection address conceptual issues related to the varying dimension of the genre in terms of its relevance to the *testimonio*

in India, while three focus on testimonial literature written in Oriya, Bangla and Marathi respectively.

"The history of Indian and Latin American subalternities is encoded in the specific literary forms that testimonial narratives ... adopt in each case." Francesca Denegri substantiates this claim through the observation that Latin American *testimonios* are still largely products of collaborations in a contact zone between narrators and mediators. Dalit writers have "cracked open the walls of the lettered city without the need of mediation from upper castes." The Latin American contact zone, produced at the time of Conquest, comprised "long term, concrete collaboration between the conquered and the conqueror in the form of mediators, interpreters, scribes, or assistants to the state apparatus, who act as productive nexus between the clashing cultures." Citing Mary Louise Pratt, Denegri draws attention to "the arts of the contact zone" and even the "joy of the contact zone" and the prevalence of a model of community based on transculturation, interculturality and mediation in Latin America, emphasizing that such a contact zone is conspicuously absent in the Dalit context, due to the ideology of pollution and disgust which prevents any such sustained collaboration between castes in India. Explaining thus the absence of any significant earlier exchange between the members within the "walls" of Dalit culture and those in the world outside, she suggests that this difference, between a mediated narrative situated within a history of mediation and the direct "confrontational" Dalit narratives calls for further comparative study.

Abhishek Mitra identifies the unique specificity of the oral *testimonio* in the fact that it produces a poetics of transculturalism due to the negotiations that take place across linguistic and cultural boundaries within its textual space. The significance of this genre for contemporary politics, he holds, is that it embodies a vital yet paradoxical relationship between subaltern narrative and political solidarity. On the one hand the *testimonio* is confronted with a situation in which it cannot question the politics of knowledge construction and be considered a legitimate form of knowledge at the same time. On the other hand the imperative to tell the story is inhibited by the impossibility of telling it, because the "authentic" discourse of subaltern subjects is suppressed in the face

of the obligation to use the hegemonic/colonizer's discourse to express their subjectivity.

The real issues underlying the criticism of the Latin American *testimonio* as a genre are not about "authenticity" or "veracity" or even "literariness"; rather, the *testimonio* has come under attack because it raises uncomfortable questions about injustices and inequalities that are deep rooted in our societies. With this standpoint as a launching pad, Vijaya Vekataraman's study of *Rigoberta: Granddaughter of the Mayas* shows how, as a collaborative effort written in the context of peoples' movements and struggles for equality and justice, it exemplifies a discursive space where it becomes possible to negotiate an alliance between the radicalised intelligentsia and the subaltern population. A significant dimension emphasized here is that "in this *testimonio* there is no desire to nostalgically recreate a distant or lost Mayan past but to modernise the indigenous communities and locate them in the present." This essay also takes issue with Georg Guegelberger's refusal to accord this narrative the status of a *testimonio*, with his claim that the *testimonio* "is a one-time affair, a coup in the world of letters", and with his reasoning that since *I Rigoberta* achieved that coup when it was published in 1983, the second book must be regarded as Menchú's memoirs. In doing so it opens up the space for discussions of whether the *testimonio*, largely defined in generic terms, may also be defined in terms of a "one-time" impact in the world of letters.

Dalit autobiographies, which have been compared to African-American slave narratives, are now also being read in the critical framework of the Latin American *testimonio* in terms of their narrative strategies and content, and their institutional location and function vis-a-vis critical academic discourse. Having established this, Sonya Gupta revisits *testimonio* as a genre from a "Dalit-Caliban" vantage point, with critical apparatus that derives from both Cuban cultural critics and Dalit literary criticism. Reading Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) [*Biography of a Runaway Slave*, 1994] which is considered to be the founding text of the genre of Latin American *testimonio* as well as of the Cuban cultural project as it evolved after the revolutionary upheavals of 1959, she argues that

the *testimonio* does not erupt at the margin and suddenly occupy the centre as the title of Beverly's essay "The Margin at the Center" - may suggest. The institutional validation of the *testimonio* in the 1970s, it is asserted here, is from the decolonized vantage point provided by the cultural politics of Latin American revolutionary projects for national liberation; and it is also a part of the project of the Cuban revolution which provoked a new direction in literary and cultural studies and led to a profound revision of the canon. This essay also draws a comparison between the call for the recognition of a specifically Dalit aesthetic and of subjects who 'talk differently' (in light of Limbale and Guru's theorizations), and the impetus that the insightful narrative of the 106-year-old ex-slave Esteban Montejo presents for the redefinition of the notion of an intellectual.

Important mediated narratives in India too call for approaches specific to their dimensions of orality, and Raj Kumar focuses on Muli's life history recorded in James Freeman's *Untouchable: An Indian Life History* (narrated in Oriya and translated into English) to address the question of how orally narrated accounts should be read in relation to written ones. Echoing the need for a distinct Dalit aesthetic, he attempts to show why mediated Dalit narratives cannot be comprehended in terms of the conventions deployed for reading the written narratives of educated upper caste writers. The life-narratives of the upper castes, this essay asserts, comprise a site "where a collective identity is elaborated, reproduced, and transformed, in the *patterns of life* appropriate to the ruling classes. This identity is imposed upon all those who belong to or are assimilated into these classes, and it rejects the others as insignificant." Muli's life-history on the other hand thus provides an insider's view of the psychological effects of discrimination against the "rejected" people at the bottom of society, as well as the latter's "creative manipulations" and disregard of community norms. Muli's trajectory exemplifies a defiant response to extreme hunger, unemployment and abysmally low literacy rates specially of Dalits in Orissa. Choosing to become a pimp, Muli covertly disregards his community norms, while overtly he continues to go through the motions that represent "respectable" behaviour. The fact that the narrative locus

centres on Muli, and elaborates how, despite various reinventions of self, he fails to reconcile individual self and social identity, seems to cast this narrative back into the field of biography, as Raj Kumar's use of the term also indicates. Yet the fact that Muli's life-history is shown to portray the ruptures within the community in the conflicts between the ideals of his caste, his own expectations, and his actual behaviour, and that the narrative further foregrounds the rural stranglehold of economic and physical oppression such that Muli and most of the people of his caste are doomed to failure, ensures that the thrust of this narrative is ultimately at the collective level. Hunger and extreme economic and physical violence, that in certain cases lead to the creation of defiant pockets of manipulation in the Dalit community, ironically become the very basis on which the community stands united in the face of devastating oppression. This study implies that even as the norms of the community are challenged from within, the severe nature of the exploitation ensures the perpetuation of the collective, albeit internally fraught.

There is a widespread notion that "no body of 'Dalit literature in Bangla' exists, that the closest that one gets to it within the archive of Bangla literature is a body of (sympathetic) works written on caste-based oppression written not by those at the receiving end of the caste system but by reformist 'upper-caste' writers." This view is squarely challenged in Sayantan Dasgupta's essay. Foregrounding the politics of publishing and circulation, it establishes the fact that most of this work appears not in the "so-called 'mainstream' publications or as volumes published by reputed publishers with substantial distribution prowess" but in "little magazines that have limited circulation, in specialised Dalit periodicals (e.g., *Adal Badal*, *Chaturtha Duniya*, etc.) and publications and sometimes in the form of self-published volumes." Thus it claims that the visibility accorded to this body of work by readers outside the Dalit community remains limited. Citing instances such as that of Manoranjan Byapari's recent essay in *Economic and Political Weekly*,⁴ and identifying the political inspirations behind these writings

Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Marx and most often, Ambedkar — this work further demonstrates that Dalit writers themselves have started becoming vocal to a point where it has become possible even to identify a

movement of Dalit writers in Bengal. This essay suggests that the experience of being labelled a 'Dalit' empowers a writer to be palpably aware of larger, community-based Dalit experiences vis-a-vis caste discrimination and oppression, resulting in the production of writing that bears testimony to subjective but nonetheless valid and in fact *systemic* aspects of reality, and that it is further marked by a widespread urge for socio-political transformation. It is on these grounds that this body of Dalit literature in Bangla needs to be read as testimonial literature. This study also demonstrates, through close readings of the works of Manoranjan Bajpayi and Manju Bala, that while a pervasive impetus to change the prevalent social realities comprises the agenda of much of contemporary Dalit writing in Bangla, yet, it is class that remains a more abiding concern than caste.

In the highly evolved Marathi context of Dalit literature, K. Satyanarayana's essay focuses on Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (2003) and Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* (2003) as representing two movements in the history of Dalit self narratives, and also as testimonial narratives that open up new sites of struggles. Satyanarayana argues that the entry of the 'illegitimate' actors into the literary public sphere dismantles the conceptual reification of autobiography as the story of a private self, and reconfigures it as a social discourse. He calls attention to the radical possibilities of the *testimonio*, through the role of the speaking subject and its negotiations in the present, that destabilize the world and open up possibilities of democratic negotiation. Limbale's *Akkarmashi* is analysed for its striking exposition of the close link between sexuality and caste hierarchy, and for its exposure of the respectable Marathi literary establishment and its privileging of the bourgeois family and marriage.

This essay also asserts that attempts to institutionalize the *testimonio* as a literary form undermine its radical character. It emphasizes the dual character of the *testimonio* in relation to radical democratic politics, cautioning that one can not presuppose the politics of its engagement. Positing Dalit representations of caste identity and global modernity in Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* as a case in point, it argues that Jadhav's critique of caste in the nation is compromised by his desire for a cosmopolitan identity:

"Consequently, he overlooks Dalit engagement with modernity in the nation-state and celebrates a personally acquired global identity", setting up an ideal of global citizenship, "in which caste somehow just melts away".

Transformation of the Genre: Bama's *Sangati*

As the essays in this issue indicate, a direct transposition of the generic conventions of the *testimonio* from Latin America would be a reductive enterprise. Genres take shape in historical time and place, and within the cultural processes and movements of the period; this is what necessitates a sustained evaluation of the *testimonio* in our contexts. A powerful instance of the extension of the genre in India is Bama's *Sangati*. It stands out as different from the well known women's *testimonios* such as Rigoberta's and Domitila's in its interweaving of voices of various dalit women as multiple narrators. Thus, alongside Bama, her mother, grandmother and other women in the community also find place as narrators, reinforcing the sense of collective identity that informs the *testimonio*. The presence of multiple narrators is not new to the *testimonio* as is evident in Partnoy's 1986 account of life in a concentration camp, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina*; however, what marks *Sangati* as unique is the structuring of a *dissenting* community of dalit women within the larger community of dalits posited as dalit patriarchy in the text. *Sangati* hinges on a fine balance in structuring such that *both*, the dalit community in the face of the upper-caste world, and the dalit women's community, in the face of the internal dalit patriarchy as well as the external upper-caste patriarchy, *together* comprise the locus of the narrative. Thereby the complex standpoint of Dalit women as women against patriarchy, both internal and external, yet as women asserting their dalit identity, within the community and in full loyalty to the dalit identity, is reinforced in the narrative in no uncertain terms. There are strong dissenting feminist voices to be found in the shorter Telengana women's narratives, even as the overall loyalty to the Telengana People's movement is emphasized, but the multiple voices there find place more in discrete chapters rather

than interwoven in dialogue and debate as in *Sangati*. Representation of internal dissent within the collective is not foreign to the Latin American *testimonios* either, and there are several instances of it in *I Rigoberta Menchú, Let Me Speak* and *Sandino's Daughters*. Yet in none of these does one find such a sustained articulation of a feminist community and voice – or of any other internally dissenting collective – and of the integrated locus of a collective within a collective, dissenting internally, yet united in the face of the world.

Not unexpectedly, careful generic analysis also yields insight about the political conditions of the very production of the text, as has been well established by Bakhtin in his exposition of heteroglossia, whereby the context seeps its way into, and establishes its primacy over the text. In the case of *Sangati*, what becomes evident is that the very fact that such an internally dissenting feminist work could not only be written by a woman emphasizing her loyalty to Dalit identity, but also be lauded by Dalit scholars such as Raj Gauthaman (Bama: xv) and Gopal Guru, actually also marks the coming of age of the Dalit movement in India. In comparison, the fact that such an internally dissenting feminist locus did not develop in the Latin American narratives under discussion here is an indicator of the fragile political situation under the dictatorships or oppressive regimes in which those works were compiled, where the assertion of the solidarity of the Sandinistas, or of the indigenous people of Guatemala or Bolivia was such a dire political imperative that internal dissent could as yet not be articulated by those loyal to the common cause. The acceptance of the simultaneous investment in the Dalit collective and the feminist “counter-public sphere” within it signals a certain political confidence of the Dalit movement that allows for the emergence as well as public representation of other solidarities within it, however strife-ridden the internal dynamics may be.

Parallel to the ways in which the genre of the novel was significantly transformed even as it took root in India, the *testimonio* too has already shown signs of developing its own character in our specific historical and political conditions, and this is what needs careful theorization now. Where the *testimonio* is marked by a completely integrated and unquestionably unified collective voice, it does risk the danger of

taking on the dimensions of a mythology, albeit a necessary one in the face of hegemonic mythologies that endanger the well-being and very existence too of marginalized communities. Yet, when the *testimonio* can afford, when political conditions permit, to arrive at a point of maturity such that internally dissenting perspectives nuance the standpoint of the collective, then it has truly arrived as a testament of history.

Limits of the Collective Voice

The logic of this genre of collective struggle is such that it imbues the subject of the collective aesthetics of the *testimonio* with a potential that exceeds the individual self: "the subject of a revolutionary politics is not the individual militant.....any more than it is the chimera of a class subject." (Badiou: 43) Thus, in the struggles of the Mayan people, Rigoberta Menchú is no more the individual militant; she enters into the composition of this subject that is the bearer of the "truth" of the Quiche struggles, even as Ambedkar was the bearer of the "truth" of the Dalit subject, or as Bama and her community of women are now, of the "truth" of the Dalit feminist subject position. Thus even as the individual or collective enters into the composition of this subject, the subject exceeds the individual self. It is precisely this excess that imbues the subject with its representative power and infuses the *testimonio* itself with its unique potential for nurturing a collective consciousness.⁸

There is then one more question that must be asked, and that is, "What are the limits of the collective voice in the *testimonio*?" Such an investigation need not necessarily be violative of political commitment, for while it may seem to imply a challenging of the collective spirit and of political solidarity within the community, yet it may actually yield insights into experiences that have not yet found place in a collective voice, or may never do so. Such insights may hold valence at the level of individual experience without deserving to be written off as "bourgeois" or individualistic in nature. Bama's narratives, and Sivakami's fiction too, are testimony to the fact that women's experiences, that eventually found validation in the solidarity of women represented in these works,

once inhabited the realm of the individual. In fact, "as the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode", (Rege: 14) the *testimonio* throws into sharp focus the systemic political nature of what may seem to be individual instances of oppression and suffering. Thus the articulations of individual experience that have not yet found expression in the collective mode mark one of the limits of the *testimonio*.

The potential to engage with new questions that find no representation in the institutional domain can however be fraught with political complexities. As K. Satyanarayana has shown in the case of Narendra Jadhav's privileging of a global identity over the anti-caste struggle, "one can not presuppose the politics of this engagement". On another note, Rege rightly emphasizes that "reading dalit 'life narratives' minus the political ideology and practices of the dalit movement does stand the risk of making a spectacle of dalit suffering and pain for non-dalit readers". (15) Yet, with Bama's *testimonios*, and even more so with others, the critical question is one of the absence of the personal, intimate negotiations with histories of strife that may not shape visible historical transformations, are not yet charted in public discourse or master narratives, even of the community, but do nevertheless shape and sediment culture, transforming individual selves and the cultural texture of societies in as yet invisible ways. These do not find place in the collective voice, or in the ideology and practices of the movement, for they may be specific to each individual, and yet result in the very strengthening of self that make individuals and collectives capable of mobilizing history.

And for peoples disinherited and marginalized across centuries, or incarcerated under repressive regimes, there must also be anguished negotiations of self with community and history, in the realms of interiority, that fail. In fact the resurgence of the diary as an important genre under dictatorial regimes bears testimony to the impact of political injustices on the emotional and psychological life of individuals and the struggles in the realm of interiority. Anne Frank's diary written in the Nazi era is the most famous instance of this, and María del Carmen Sillato's *Dialogos de amor contra el silencio; memorias de prision, sueños de libertad*, 2006 (*Dialogues of Love Against Silence: Memories of Prison, Dreams of Liberty*) a powerful recent example. This is an intimate diary, about the pain of a woman, a fighter and a mother,

kidnapped and tortured first in the military torture chambers, and later kept in prison for almost four years without a trial in Argentina during the Dirty War of the 1976-83. "It's.....an example of solidarity and a tribute to those who are no longer with us: the dead and the disappeared," says Sillato." The workings of the internal, liberating transformations that enable survival, and even more so the intimate experience of painful failures, inhabit silent netherworlds and mark the limits of the collective voice in the *testimonio*.

Since the Dalit movement has come of age, the challenge, if it is to continue to extend its concern to those silenced in as yet unrecognized ways, is to read between the lines of the *testimonio* to locate the unarticulated transformations of self — and to read beyond its lines and into the silences within the community, to look, if possible, for those who fell by the wayside. It is only by addressing the silences underlying the collective voice, and the blind spots as well as internal hierarchies of the collective consciousness in the community, that the struggles can fortify themselves and the *testimonio* survive, both as a genre and as a political weapon.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In an earlier essay on the generic nature of the *testimonio*, I have elaborated how it marks its place in the interstices of history and literature: "From the point of view of literary study, it inhabits the zone

of indeterminacy between historiography, autobiography and the novel. It narrates history but is distinct from historiography in terms of its foregrounding of hitherto silenced voices, and its nurturing of collective identity and consciousness; it is not autobiography in that it comprises eye-witness accounts of collective struggle, and while possessing literary quality in terms of its ability to interweave aesthetic and narrative dimensions, it is not exactly fiction in that it represents lived experience, and does make claims to "truth". Finally, the genre of the *testimonio* is not to be confused with testimonies delivered by witnesses in courtroom trials either, as will become evident in the rest of this essay." (Pantabi, 2004:122).

In Latin America, with the publication of a large number of *testimonios*, and their legitimization as a literary genre by Cuba's cultural centre the Casa de las Americas in 1970, the *testimonio* has come to stay. *Let me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (1978), *Sandino's Daughters* about women revolutionaries in Nicaragua (1984), and I Rigoberta Menchu (1984), which gained this Guatemalan Mayan woman international recognition long before she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, are just some of the pioneering examples of women's *testimonios* from Latin America.

2. In the Indian sub-continent, the *testimonio* is still in the nascent stage and has yet to gain recognition as a distinct genre. However, the presence of important testimonies narrating women's experiences of political struggle in the last three decades testifies to its growing significance in the sub-continent too. Akhtar Baluch's "Sister, are you still here?", the narrative of a Sindhi woman prisoner arrested for having protested against the detention of Sindhi nationalist and peasant leaders in Pakistan in 1970, during the interim regime of General Yahya Khan, was published in *Race and Class* in 1977, but is relatively unknown in this sub-continent. *We Were Making History : Women and the Telengana Uprising*, a collection of testimonies of women who participated in the Telengana People's Struggle of the forties in the state of Hyderabad, recorded and edited by the Stree Shakti Sangathan, was the first widely read collection of women's testimonial literature in India and was published in 1989. *Hanyaman and Jailer Bhetor Jail*, prison testimonies of the Naxalite period written by Jaya Mitra and Meenakshi Sen, came out in Bangla in 1989 and 1993 respectively, with a second volume of *Jailer Bhetor Jail* by Meenakshi Sen following

within a few months. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* was published in 1997, and with testimonies of other Dalits, the oral narratives of Bangladeshi women survivors of the mass rapes by Pakistani soldiers, and other such texts currently in various stages of publication, it is evident that the production of women's testimonial writing is steadily on the increase right across this subcontinent. Dalit women's testimonies proliferate in Maharashtra now, and English translations of Shantabai Kamble and Urmila Pawar's narratives are also available now, both of which have been reviewed in this issue.

3. "From the point of view of literary study, the crystallization of the *testimonio* as a narrative genre in the zone of indeterminacy between literary narrative, historiography and autobiography reveals the inadequacy of existing genres in representing popular struggles in hegemonic and authoritarian states in these regions. Simultaneously, it also compensates for the inadequacy of existing genres in representing collective perspectives from below. Yet, because *testimonios* foreground a critique of oppressive state rule, ... they unsettle too many equations of power, and are constantly subject to a politics of "authenticity" and "integrity" that challenge the "truth" of these testimonies." (Panjabi, 2004: 122-3)
4. Cf. The massive debate that raged for almost a decade regarding the veracity of Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, and divided Latin Americanists right across the two Americas into two opposing camps, has been brought together and published in Arturo Arias' *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.
5. The editors of the *We Were Making History* acknowledge this influence thus.

"When we first chose to do this study, one of our own aims was to recover our own history — we saw the women in the Telengana Struggle as founders of a history of women's action in Andhra, indeed in India itself. So we thought we would be tracing a lineage... But after we had done nearly forty interviews, we decided that it would be best to publish them as life stories. We now thought of it as a book that was theirs, as much as it was ours. We were also encouraged because we had read and enjoyed *Let me Speak* and *Sandino's Daughters*." (280) Given the strong parallels in the political and historical experiences of women in these cases, there was ready ground here for the reception of this influence: the Telengana women's narratives, like the Central American *testimonios* cited by the former's

editors, are situated in the historical context of crises in nationalism in contemporary postcolonial societies, and the increasing articulation of the role of women in these struggles.

6. Cf. Nilanjana Bhattacharya's review of the English translation of Baby Kamble's narrative in this issue.
7. I am grateful to Alicia Partnoy, Shikha Mukherjee and Swapan Chakravorty for the discussion on mythology and testament that took place at the seminar "Prisons, Politics & Poetry in Argentina and India", organized by the Centre for Studies in Latin American Literatures and Cultures (CSLALC), Dept. of Comparative Literature, Jadavpu University, on 1.2.10.
8. Cf. Panjabi, 2004 for a more detailed discussion.
9. <http://martazabaleta.blogspot.com/2007/10/dialogos-de-amor-contra-el-silencio.html>

**TESTIMONIO AND SUBALTERNITIES
IN INDIA AND LATIN AMERICA**

*Communities are distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness but
by the style in which they are imagined.
Imagined Communities.*

Benedict Anderson

From a Latin American perspective the robust emergency of Dalit testimonial narratives in the last two decades is both inspiring and intriguing. The diversity of this 'genre of the oppressed' in its Indian form, comprising as it does, texts written in different languages, and from diverse perspectives which depend on regional and on subcastes' histories, can be overwhelming indeed. Besides the old regional distinctions of north-south, and east-west, there is also the unequal impact on Dalits of recent political developments and legislation, the most discussed of which is the reservation system that has allowed access to higher education, government jobs and upward social mobility to some, but not all, of three generations of Dalits since the new Constitution of Independent India banning caste discrimination was adopted in 1949. Thus the emergence of a new profile of educated urban, middle class Dalit writer of testimonial narratives, who stands in sharp contrast with the more traditional profile of a poor, unlettered rural Dalit, adds to the complexity of the picture. Notice that the word I used here is writer of testimonial narratives, not oral informant. For one of the prominent features that this diverse corpus of Dalit literature presents, and which differs sharply from the Latin American *testimonio*, is that it has mostly been authored directly and without mediation by Dalit writers who do not need nor wish to depend on upper caste Indians to tell their own

stories to the world. There are few exceptions to this rule, of which the Tamil *Viramma* and the Telegana *We Were Making History* are well known. Both these texts fall within the more classic ethnographic tradition based on oral life stories which is central to the development of the Latin American *testimonio*, and are thus by and large exceptions to the mainstream Dalit genre. For the fact is that Dalits have entered vigorously in the Indian literary sphere as writers in their own right whereas Latin American *testimonio* narrators remain, by choice or necessity, largely within the oral tradition of their own cultures. The different shades of meaning that resonate within the universe of mediated and unmediated accounts, and the contrasting set of energies and emotions which are mobilised in the realism of orality and of writing, are some of the features that I intend to discuss in this paper.

As more Dalits gain access to that bastion of privilege which literature symbolises, the practice of reading Dalit testimonial narratives within the critical framework of Latin American *testimonio* is enticing. Not least because of the endeavours within the Dalit writing community itself to look beyond the confines of the Indian literary tradition and into paradigms provided by subaltern movements elsewhere in the world as a source of empowerment and identity. Indeed the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s adopted not only the name but also the use of autobiography as a counter hegemonic literary genre from the Black Panthers in the USA. Ambedkhar's interest in the Black American struggle has become, over the years, a source of social and even racial identification amongst many Dalits who see themselves as Asian Blacks and write about their African ancestry. In search of an acceptable identity and history outside Hinduism and outside their native India, the Dalits are making efforts to include themselves in the concept of Pan-Africanism and connect with Black and African movements around the globe. To understand the Dalit's need to look beyond native cultural traditions in India, one must consider that, if literature in its written form is universally drenched with elitist connotations, this elitism is particularly insidious in India, where the sacred scripts (the Vedas, the Ramayana, the Gita and the Manusmriti) contain the blueprint for the present caste or varna system responsible for the exclusion of Dalits from the fabric of human society and from the walled Indian "lettered city". A concept proposed by Angel Rama, *la ciudad letrada* explores Latin American cities as spaces of

transculturation where diverse publics, marked by a colonial but porous hierarchy, constantly intervene in the creation, recreation and renewal of hybrid cultural practices. A different case is that of the Indian lettered city which traditionally, following the Vedas, only allowed Brahmins, and not outcastes or Shudras, to learn and practice from the sacred scripts. The fate of Shambuk or that of Eklavya are good reminders of what happens to those from below who transgress the boundaries of the lettered city. It is indeed this exclusive aspect of Hindu ideology as it appears in the sacred scripts which have propelled massive conversion movements amongst Dalits not only to Buddhism but also to Christianity, Sikhism and Islam which, in theory if not in practice, are egalitarian ideologies.²

In her essay on "Transcultural Politics and Aesthetics", Kavita Panjabi refers to the impact of *Sandino's Daughters*, a collection of Nicaraguan women's testimonies, on Indian feminist historiography in general, and on the Telangana's *We Were Making History* in particular.³ Panjabi views women's testimonies as a transcultural genre narrated across "the divides of the indigenous and the metropolitan, the political struggle of the marginalized and the elite world of letters, the collective and the individual, and often across nations too." Furthermore, and highlighting how the experience of mediation with the oral world of the Telangana women fighters impacted the very sense of identity of the middle class, lettered Stree Shakti ad Sangathan ("...constantly with us was the feeling ... that we had been there before ourselves. We matched incidents in their lives with those in ours : 'Oh! she's like you or X or Y' we'd comment ... Gradually these stories became part of our own mythology." 280), Panjabi points out that the space created in the process of *testimonio* production provides a particularly productive bridge where class at either end of the divide meet and recognise each other, and where a collective identity and consciousness is developed between interlocutors.

Panjabi's argument strikes an important chord with readers familiar with Latin American *testimonio*, where the voice of the unlettered subaltern *campesino* is rendered audible by middle class intellectuals who, in the process of textual production, undergo a transformation vis a vis the perception of "the other", as the very fabric of that "other" subaltern community becomes intimate and familiar to the world of the

compiler. Elena Poniatowska's comments regarding the transformative process that she experienced in the writing of *Here is to you Jesusa*, poignantly reveal the trans-cultural, trans-class, trans-identity power that mediated *testimonio* exerts over the interlocutors who by, definition, represent contrasting class origins. Poniatowska, whose quintessentially upper class Mexican background is well known, declares that Josefina (Jesusa in the text) offered her the opportunity to come into contact with a social reality that she couldn't even have imagined from within her crystal tower. Josefina Bórquez, says Poniatowska, allowed her to become, once and for all, part of her own country, something she had yearned for ever since her arrival in Mexico as a privileged French-speaking girl, when the war in Europe broke out. "Something was born inside me, something new that wasn't there before", says Poniatowska. "It was my becoming a Mexican ... Mexico was born inside me through Josefina." Not unlike the Telangana women's stories becoming unwittingly part of Stree Shakti Sanghatana's own personal mythology, Bórquez's Mexico eventually, through the process of interviewing and editing, becomes Poniatowska's own personal Mexico. In this context, the transformative powers of the narrative relation between Miguel Barnet and Esteban Montejo as examined by Sonya Gupta is equally illuminating.

In a similar comparative vein, and after exploring the nomenclature available for women's Dalit autobiographies, Sharmila Rege concludes that the category *testimonio*, in its original Latin American form and context - i.e. an antihegemonic direct-participant account which saw its heyday in the popular struggles against dictatorial regimes of the 60s and 70s in Central and South America - is appropriate to the corpus in question, as Dalit women's narratives are produced, like their Latin American precursors, within the firm ideology and vintage point of a liberation movement. Against the arguments emerging from some sections of the Dalit middle classes for whom these texts are a "source of embarrassment" (Rege 12), *testimonio*, a term suffused in legalistic and political connotation, would empower - instead of embarrass - the oppressed subject as well as contest the official pretence that caste oppression is no longer an issue in secular India. Following some of John Beverley's points in his foundational essay "The margin at the centre" (1996), Rege argues that Dalit testimonial narratives problematise,

just as Latin American *testimonios* before them, two questions. The first one concerns the potentially conflicting relationship between personal truth and empirical factuality, and the second one addresses the representation of the individual and the collective self within a genre normally associated with the bourgeoisie's reverence of self as a discrete entity.

While it is important to identify the common structures that give meaning to both Indian and Latin American testimonial narratives, it is equally important not to neglect the structural differences which make *testimonio* a distinctly modern Latin American genre, and Dalit *testimony*, a specifically modern Indian one. Rege's use of Beverley's definition intriguingly excludes two of the central points that Beverley explores at length in his essay, and which have been pivotal in debates on Latin American *testimonio* for the last two decades. These are, first, the question of mediation and the relationship in which narrator and editor are involved in the production of the narratives, which Beverley describes as "one of the more hotly debated theoretical points in the discussion of the genre" (27), and second, a crucial corollary to this, the conflicting relations negotiated between orality and writing, as distinct sources of knowledge, in the act of producing the *testimonio*. On the other hand, while Kavita Panjabi's discussion on the transcultural nature of *testimonio* illuminates the Telangana women's narratives, the other texts studied in her paper are non-mediated memoirs and dairies written individually by their authors, and in this sense they follow an entirely different dynamics to that of *We Were Making History*.⁵

The paucity of discussion around the concepts of mediation and orality in the context of Dalit testimonies seems self-explanatory: with the universalisation of education and reservation policies, Dalit writers, as pointed out above, have now cracked open the walls of the lettered city without the need of mediation from upper castes. However the fact that such a momentous event was not preceded by periods when voices of the untouchable could be heard within any quarters of the Indian lettered cities suggests the vapidness of a transcultural zone where those inside and outside their walls could engage in productive exchange. I suggest that the history of Indian and Latin American subalternities is encoded in the specific literary

forms the testimonial narratives, as the "genre of the subaltern", adopt in each case.

The Contact Zone and Mediation

Subalternity is a relational condition. Dalits today are subaltern in relation to upper caste Indians, as the indigenous Quiche and Quechua *campesinos* descendant of Mayas and Incas are today subaltern in relation to the dominant ladino or creole of Spanish origin. *Testimonio* as it is known today, is an expression of Latin American subalternity within the contact zone produced at the time of Conquest. "Contact zone" is a concept used by Mary Louise Pratt who defines it as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (44). Confrontation, then, is what primarily defines the contact zone but, argues Pratt, there is also long term, concrete collaboration between the conquered and the conqueror in the form of mediators, interpreters, scribes, or assistants to the state apparatus who act as productive nexus between the clashing cultures. This is what Pratt calls "the arts of the contact zone" and even the "joy of the contact zone" (29). It evokes a model of community based on "transculturation, interculturality, mediation, critique, denunciation and instability." Because it is also a zone which dwells in unequal conflict and hierarchy, the threat of an upturn of the status quo, the threat of war and revolt, is also a feature of the contact zone. It spells danger, but it can be equally artful. The rise of Latin American *testimonio* can be read as a result of two factors which converged in the late 1960s. First, the existence in the region of a rich and continuous ethnographic tradition within the contact zone, going back to the Chronicles, with a strong interest in the oral accounts of natives; and second, the social liberation movements which swept across the continent after the Cuban revolution mobilising the interest of the middle class intellectual to give voice to the indigenous *campesinos* who were seen as fellows in the common struggle against authoritarian states.

On their arrival in the cities of the New World, the Spanish chroniclers registered in meticulous details indigenous customs, belief

systems, social structures, military history, layout of roads, organization of the land, and imperial architecture, all of which involved intense work with the oral cultures of the natives. Likewise the need to establish political alliances between the Spaniards and the native aristocracy involved an extensive network of intermarriage between women of the royal lineages and Spanish soldiers and chroniclers. One could say that the historiography of Conquest is founded on accounts and practices of mediation and negotiation between orality and writing, and between the indigenous and western systems of knowledge represented by the major interlocutors, the Spanish *vencedores* and the native *vencidos* (Wachtel, 12). The terminology emphasizes a society founded on conquest and war, a man-made scenario with its aftermath of domination, inequality, discontent and above all, permanent instability, in opposition to the Hindu varna system which claims to be a god-made society as revealed through the books of divine inspiration, the Vedas, and therefore static, permanent, uncontested.

The memory of this deeply conflicted original encounter is crucial in understanding the fraught attempts in which Latin American nations have engaged time and time again in the project of defining their cultural identities. In literary terms, the projects of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, in their various shapes and colours, have saturated the Latin American literary corpus, from Romantic Indianism in the early 19th century, to realist Indianism fifty years later, to all brands of 20th c. *indigenismo* and *neindigenismo*. Politically both *indigenismo* and *mestizaje* have had a profound impact on modern political movements in the region, from the APRA in Peru to the Revolution in Mexico, both of which endeavoured to challenge the established political and social order of the "white" elites by reclaiming power for the Indian and the mestizo. However "white" this elite might perceive itself, it does not operate in isolation from the subaltern. From the very first encounter in the contact zone - and despite the ideology of racism and purity of blood in which the Spaniards were steeped in the wake of the expulsion of Moors and Jews from their territory - exogamy was the norm. In this as in other practices, metropolitan laws in the colonies were "observed but not obeyed" and colonials soon learnt to improvise and push the frontiers of what was lawful in order to live day by day in their new and strange world (Denegri, 73-86). This initial interactive and improvisational

dimension of the contact zone, which continues in time through a series of socio-political events and cultural forms of which *testimonio* as a mediated genre between the unlettered subaltern and the intellectual elite is but one example, stands in contrast with the Indian caste system, where untouchability and its corollary of enforced separateness amongst castes is common practice.

In India, writes Gopal Guru, the discourse on untouchability is built up around the "moral economy" of the idea of touch "which achieves fragmentation with no investment of power; that is to say, it is *withdrawal from*, rather than *engagement with*, bodies that creates the other: the untouchable." (16). Untouchability demands that upper castes protect their pure, sacred bodies from the ritually defiling bodies of the untouchables, through insulation rather than assimilation, hence the location of Dalits in discreet socio-spatial units outside villages and the strict regulations that are enforced still today in order to separate access to water, tea, food, classroom space, temples, burial grounds, etc. The opening scene of Stalin K's documentary *India Untouched - Stories of a People Apart* (2007) is poignantly revealing of this ideology which prevents the construction of a contact zone between castes in India. In the first sequence we see a group of children laughing and playing about on a hot, dusty village road as they are walking home from school, as any ordinary group of children in any ordinary place in the world would do. However the ordinariness of this image soon gives way to an uncanny, unfamiliar scene, as the children suddenly balk at what seems like an invisible barrier, an invisible cordon which prevents them from going any further. When the documentarist asks why they have stopped, we hear their innocent voices answering in a matter of fact tone, as in a classroom rōta, "Because this is the Dalit's quarters." The silence which follows is then broken by a boy who flashing an innocent but painful smile explains: "If we go in, we get polluted". The ambiguity of the smile suggests that it is not clear whether the boy really understands the meaning of his answer. What is clear is that this is a rule which he and his small friends know they must not break.

In insulating the upper castes from the touch of the other, Hinduist ideology has simultaneously constructed the realm of the untouchable as repulsive and polluting. The first images offered by Dalit testimonial

narratives of their neighbourhoods adds depth to the scene described in the documentary. After a detailed mapping of the different caste communities which occupy a distinct and separate space in her village in Tamil Nadu, Bama muses : "I don't know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours" (6). Apart from that invisible cordon which demarcates the frontier between her Paraya community and the others, Bama warns of a more perceptive and polluting demarcation at work in her Dalit quarters : "in the darkness and the mire, you had to watch out 'for shit as you came and went'" (76). Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (itself a word connected to the ideology of pollution as it refers to food contaminated by having been eaten before, the leftovers that his community got as payment from their labour) likewise begins with a description of his Chuhra *basti* as distinctly separated from the village by a pond-cum-sewage. Writes Valmiki : "On the edges of the pond were the homes of the Chuhraas. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight... They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency, exposing their private parts." (1) Intertwined with the description of physical separateness from the rest of the village is the memory of disgust and shame at women's exposure of their genitalia (why he only remembers women, and not men, defecating in the shores is a question that Valmiki avoids) and again, shit.

These are memories in which not even that quintessential symbol of purity across cultures which is the bride is spared of associations with a ritually defiling body. The description continues : "All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at this same spot. There was muck strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pups wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood" (2). More than rage, the overwhelming emotion here is shame at a life of abjection which is condensed in images of shit, pigs, female genitalia and quarrels. Despite the Dalit writers' agenda to help in the reinvention of their identity

through a process of resemantization of symbols and experiences which would reinvest them with positive signs, these endeavours are ridden with conflict. So although pigs, which the dominant Hindu discourse defines as polluting and associates with Dalits, are described elsewhere in Valmiki's narrative in a positive light as symbols not of filth but of prosperity, the images conjured up remain deeply ambivalent. Likewise in Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit*, after having described the catching, killing and eating of a pig in celebratory mode, he writes : "Today, remembering those days fills me with hate. Eating raw pig's meat is such an uncivilized and repulsive thing. Our hands and mouths used to be covered with fat. A lot of flies used to swarm around my face and hands. Yuk! Thinking about it now makes me feel nauseous!" (Sarah Beth, 555-556).

Not only has this insidious ideology of purity and pollution managed to produce, over the millennia, the spatial structures of exclusion which Valmiki, Surajpal, Bama and other writers describe, it has also managed to instill in a number of Dalit writers an identity steeped in shame and guilt which borders, as Valmiki himself writes, on an inferiority-complex. The ideology of pollution and disgust has indeed also been deployed by the State at times of crisis and war in Latin America, as a way of instigating and justifying violence against the indigenous subaltern, as Rocio Silva Santisteban clearly argues in her work about Peru's "terror years" (1980-2000). However it is important to stress that such ideologies in Latin America are successful at times of armed confrontation and civil war and that as such they do not constitute the status quo. Hence, more than shame and guilt, narrators of Latin American *testimonio* oscillate between rage for the exploitation suffered, and melancholia for the loss of a glorious past, as in Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* where she records her culture's past, celebrating rituals, custom, and traditions with a sense of wonder, mystery and pride, always evoking a feeling of reverence, never of disgust.

Memory and Identity in Indian and Amerindian subalternities

One of the visible narrative tensions of Dalit testimonies is provided by the writers' explicit adherence to a Dalit identity which however

appears enmeshed in a negative cluster of emotions associated with humiliation and pollution. The question is how to undergo a cleansing process from the memories of pain, hate and shame associated with Dalithood without submitting to acculturation or sanskritisation. "To focus single-mindedly on education to improve the caste" (29) is the message signposted at every intersection, as the narrator's Pitaji insists in *Joothan*. Whilst each step taken in this direction is indeed a step further away from the scene/sin of original abjection, it also risks being a step further away from the narrator's basti. Turning back to face the path that led him away from the stench of the Dabbowali, the narrator in *Joothan* reconfirms his commitment to "improve the caste". Thus is configured the field of conflicting forces in which this unresolved crisis of identity will remain, with no relief, at play. Over and over again Valmiki will come back to his village to question, from his educated urban, middle class vantage point, his jati's traditions and rituals, the pigs rooting in the compound, the pujas, the consumption of alcohol, the rows, the din, the bantering, the small talk of "the poor illiterate" (32), the humiliating "salaam", and the stench, always, always the stench. The more "separated from these conventions" he becomes, the more he seems to offend his family, the more he takes refuge in his books. Conversely, from the point of view of the others in the basti, and despite the consensual mantra that only education will improve caste, the more committed the narrator becomes to his studies, the more often he is seen as a "Chuhre pretending to be a Brahmin" (62). Alas, there seems to be no escape from this wrenching identity conflict.

The tensions between the now educated, middle class Dalit narrator and the uneducated, poor Chuhre left behind in the basti is enacted in the sliding, within single, discreet scenes, of the first grammatical person *we/us* to the third *they/them*. This grammatical sliding is enacted when the clash between Dalit collective ideology (turning Chuhre values and practices to be upheld) and personal, intimate emotion (the feeling of humiliation and shame at evoking these practices) reaches a point of saturation, as in the scene which gives the title to the book. Here, the narrator describes the routine field and housework that Chuhres must do in order to get food. This paragraph is written in the first person plural, closing thus: "To compensate us for all this work, we got five seers of grain... Sometimes the joothan,

the scraps, would also be put in the basket with the rotis for *us*..." Suddenly and without warning the narrator slides from an inclusive *us* to a distanced, exclusive *they* : "After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhra's baskets, which *they* took home, to save the joothan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make *them* happy... Poor things, *they* had never enjoyed a wedding feast. So they had licked it all up."

The representation of scenes which have pigs as its centre is represented within the same sliding mode. "The pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbol of dirt to *us* but of prosperity and so they are today. Yes, the educated among *us*, who are still very minute in percentage, have separated *themselves* from these conventions. It is not because of a reformist perspective but because of *their* inferiority complex that they have done so. The educated ones suffer more from this inferiority complex that is caused by social pressures" (13.) As Dalits escape poverty by pursuing high standards of education and by moving to cities in search of better employment opportunities and better schools for their children, new problems arise in the face of 'social pressures' to sanskritise and hide the caste, as the distancing of *themselves* from caste slowly but surely erodes the collective identity. The temptation to hide the caste is enormous because "As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes. The whispers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it?" (134). Revealing caste in Omprakash's narrative seems to be as utterly momentous as coming out of the closet is for a gay individual, for what is at stake is nothing less than being rejected or accepted for what one really is. Valmiki's heart is not wrong when it pounds fiercely at the suspicion that he will be rejected, in horror, by a budding sweetheart after revealing his caste. Upon "coming out" the lacerating realization that all links with this friend have been snapped, the overriding feeling is not pain, but relief at having confessed : "Immersed in the uproar that was going on inside me, I could feel that the tension was dissipating. As though a great burden had lifted off my chest," he writes (99).

Beup a Banghi, or a Chuhre, keeping pigs and killing them for a wedding, collecting joothan to eat, being forced to sweep the school during class hours, having the resilience to come out at the other end with a good degree in his or her hand after so much humiliation and exploitation, these are all experiences which Dalit writers attempt to romanticise and invest with a positive sign. However, after millennia of relentless untouchability and invisibility, the memory of an ancient, proud past necessary to prop up the Dalit's new political identity is elusive. Such is the magnitude of the problem, that some Dalit activists call for the shedding of traditions and for the adoption of a fresh Western identity. Writes Chandra Bhan Prasad, columnist of the English language daily *Pioneer*: "Dalits have a distinct culture. But we should not glorify it. Neither do we want Brahman / Shudra culture. We want European Culture, which is the best. When the West's economic model is turning out to be the standard model for most nations, why not their culture?" Every Dalit who is happy today, it is because he is westernised. With which culture was Dr. Ambedkar more close? Was it not western?"

Ambedkar was clearly concerned with the temptations of acculturation for Dalits in the future. Thus his urge to Dalit writers to give luster to their history by developing new symbols from political readings of Indian's ancient mythology. "The Sita in your novels and stories is now crossing the 'Lakshmanrekha' — the forbidden line. Draupadi's clothes are being taken away in the court of Duryodhan — Dushyant does not recognize Shakuntala, she is getting exiled. That is why I earnestly want to tell the writers: manifest in your literary forms [our] noble life-values and cultural values." If Ambedkar's suggested path appears today as one which is fraught with ambiguities for Dalit writers whose work begins to circulate in the contact zone, his directive translates well in another entirely different field of Dalit literature, where noble cultural values and glowing history is precisely what abounds. This is the field of pamphlets, studied in careful and illuminating detail by Sarah Beth Wilkerson in her thesis on Dalit Hindi literature. Sarah Beth defines the field, after Nancy Fraser, as a "subaltern counter-public", which is staged, she argues, in "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to withdraw, regroup and train and to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (123-124). Pamphlet writers like Swami Achutanandya of the Adi Hindu movement, influenced by Jyotibu Phule, maintain that all lower caste communities are non-hindu descendants of the Indus valley's original inhabitants (71-80). They were a peace loving, egalitarian, honest race, who upon being invaded by the Aryans were forced into accepting the caste system. In this alternative scenario, Hindus are foreign invaders, Sanskrit is a foreign language and therefore the legitimacy of the sacred Sanskrit scriptures needs to be seriously questioned. Claims about Dalits being the original and legitimate inhabitants of India re interwoven with recent archaeological evidence of pre-Aryan civilizations like Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, which Dalit pamphlet writers believe were built by their ancestors. Umesh Kumar's "Bhartiya Achambha" explains contemporary divisions of Dalit ancestors into OBC, SC, TC in a way that unifies them all as victims of the same invasion and its aftermath. According to this theory, at being invaded, a group fled to the forest and later became the adivasis, another group submitted, thus becoming the servants or Shudras, of the Brahmin invaders, and the third group, the SC's, fought them and therefore were excluded from Hindu society (78). The aftermath was social division and regression, and above all, such severe mental enslavement that the conquered began to attribute their situation of unspeakable oppression to the will of gods, a fact that would explain Dalits' difficulty with asserting their identity today. To counteract these divine voices, counter readings of the Ramayana, following Periyar's "The Character of the Ramayan" (1930) also circulate in pamphlet form. In these, King Ram, far from being the ideal ruler, is portrayed as corrupt and immoral, a lazy - meat eating womanizer who beheads Shambuk not really for being a lower caste member who practices meditation thereby contravening the laws written in the Vedas, but because he dares to speak out against Ram. And just as in this version Ram is vilified and Ravanna, conversely, is glorified, there are endless other pamphlets which deconstruct the Manusmriti, the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata and turn symbols of humiliation and exploitation into symbols of Dalit protest and pride (Sarah Beth, 92).⁴

As I hope is clear despite the rushed summary, pamphlet literature unequivocally endeavours to empower Dalits with liberative historical

month. And, as probably suspected by readers, this literature, unlike Dalit testimonial narratives, is excluded and silenced by the official, public sphere. Indeed, argues Sarah Beth, the entire literary circuit in which pamphlets move, from the production stages to the printing, and from the distribution networks to the reading practices, is strictly confined to the Dalit counter public sphere. In other words, the steady and vibrant flow of Dalit pamphlet literature circulates entirely outside the contact zone as it is written by Dalits for a Dalit audience, and as it circulates exclusively in Dalit festivals, political meetings, rallies and melas, standing firmly outside the contact zone and public debate. Conversely, the conflict - ridden Dalit testimonial narratives discussed above enjoy a healthy visibility on the list of major publishers in India, and are featuring in the reading lists of universities in the USA, France and England. In pamphlet literature, the conflict between the personal and collective identities which so permeates *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit* is necessarily absent, as it constitutes the counter public sphere in which Dalit history is reconstructed to invest the caste with a much needed distinct and superior socio-ethnic identity.

The notion of a counter public sphere, so important to understand the production of an unambiguously positive literature amongst Dalits, may also be relevant in the case of Latin American subalternities, but only to a certain extent, as knowledge of a glorious imperial past is densely documented *within* the contact zone. The first documents available in a long and continuous series of mediated sources are the Chronicles of Conquest, accounts about life in the New World before and during the invasion of the Spaniards, told orally by indigenous narrators who acted as interpreters for the Spanish *cronista*. The most famous interpreter and mediator is no doubt La Malinche, or Malintzin, a Nahuatl woman who accompanied Cortés in his long march from Tabasco to Tenochtitlan, playing the roles of go-between between Spaniards and natives. Although most early chronicles are written by Spaniards, first generation mestizos and Quechua Indians also produced their own accounts based on oral stories told by their elders. Prominent examples in Peru are Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess and author of, amongst other books, *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* about life in his native Cusco

before the invasion, and Guaman Poma de Ayala, a converted Christian Indian, who wrote one of the most provocative chronicles in the New World, *Coronicus de buen gobierno* in the shape of a letter written in Quechua and Spanish to the King of Spain to raise the plight of the Indian under colonial rule and to reposition his community away from the periphery and into the centre of the Christian world.

This early genre of testimonial narratives enjoyed a continuity throughout the colonial period, a time when indigenous foundational books, such as the *Popol Vuh* (Guatemala) and *Dioses y Hombres de Huarochiri* (Peru) emerged, also in the contact zone, revealing the complex creation myths of the Quiche and the Yunga peoples to the colonists. Whilst the former was translated from the Maya Codex, and the latter was collected from oral accounts in Quechua, both books represent the endeavours of mestizo and Spanish men of letters to delve into accounts of native cosmogonies. Their motivations, different as they were, throw light how indigenous non-lettered societies interacted with the colonial Spanish and mestizo ruling class in those earlier days. The *Popol Vuh*, originally written from memory by a group of Quiche Indians right after Conquest in their bid to save it from the pyre of evangelical zeal, was translated by Francisco Ximénez, a Spanish Dominican friar who so admired and respected the Quiche culture that he learnt the language and later, at the end of the 17th century when shown the hitherto hidden Quiche manuscript by native friends, translated it into Spanish. A far cry from this labour of love is the story of Francisco de Avila who, backed by the Inquisition, recollected the rituals and myths of the people of Yaugos in order to "extirpate idolatries" and destroy the Andean pantheon. However different the motivation of Avila and Ximenez was, both cases exemplify how encounters in the Latin American contact zone generated documents which represent the history of the *vencidos*, thus keeping the proud memory of native gods and kings, rituals and social traditions alive in the contemporary imagined communities.

The density and depth of available documentation which covers over five centuries can be read then as part of the productive interaction between the lettered and the unlettered, the oral and the written, the colonist and the colonized that takes place within the contact zone in Mesoamerica, Mexico and the Andes. Whether examined, celebrated

or contested, the *Popol Vuh*, the *Chilam Balam*, Guaman's *Corónica*, the Huastec manuscript and the Nahua codices, amongst others' are part of the national canons of Guatemala, Peru and Mexico, and as such cannot be ignored nor pushed away from the contact zone. These documents have survived wars and genocides, and the knowledge contained in their pages has remained intact in the hearts and minds of indigenous peoples providing an ontological basis for their struggle. Says Rigoberta Menchú in the context of her struggle: "I used to spend three hours a day reading, that's how I got to know the *Popol Vuh*, the *Chilam Balam*, and other history books. And that's how one becomes focused on America, because one's heart and one's navel are buried here" (Interview, 49). In her Nobel Peace Prize discourse in Stockholm, Menchu focuses on the content of Maya codices as a source of knowledge not just to her community but to the entire world. "The significance of the Maya heritage", she declared proudly, "continues to astonish the learned", "like the *The Codex of Dresden*, which contains the results of an investigation on eclipses as well as a table of 69 dates, in which solar eclipses occur in a lapse of 33 years."

Just as Menchú invokes the wisdom and power of her heritage to legitimise the plight of her community today, there is a constant demand for native symbols by politicians in Latin America which show how indigenous cultures are perceived as legitimizing agents for contemporary social movements and political parties. In Mexico, the Aztec icon of an eagle capturing a snake occupies the central place in the national flag, and Cuauhtémoc, not Cortéz is visible in monuments around the cities. Recently, in Peru, President Toledo adopted the chakana, an Andean icon, as his party's symbol, and his followers called him by the name of the great Inca Pachacutec. Just as Latin American states cannot indulge in denying their indigenous past, the indigenous communities cannot forget their own imperial history as it circulates in school textbooks, tourist brochures, press stories, essays and books, and as it is visible in archeological monuments whose Inca, Maya or Aztec authorship is beyond any question. This is all part of an indigenous, although subaltern material culture which is there for anyone to see and admire in the contact zone.

Orality and Subalternity : Bama

Once we see the continuities which connect the pre-Hispanic and colonial indigenous texts with *testimonio*, it becomes clear that this contemporary genre is part of a cultural heritage based primarily on interculturality, mediation, critique, denunciation and instability in the contact zone. Parallel to this dense literary corpus in the public sphere, there is a long oral tradition transmitted through ritual dances, theatre and myth in the counter public sphere and in the margins of the contact zone where discourses of war and resistance are formulated. One of the features that link *testimonios* to this counter public sphere is that a number of them were produced in times of war. One of the better known Latin American *testimonios*, Rigoberta Menchú's *An Indian Woman in Guatemala* is a case in point, as it constitutes part of *campesino's* resistance to the war generated by the US - backed military dictatorship in Guatemala which was to last for over thirty years, until 1996. Hence Rigoberta's insistence in the text on protecting her community from counter insurgency forces by keeping secrets "which no-one should know, not even anthropologists or intellectuals". Menchú's *testimonio*, like *Sandino's Daughters*, Omar Cabezas' *Fire from the Mountain*, Roque Dalton's *Miguel Mármol* and Domitila Barrios de Chungara's *Si me permiten hablar*, emerge like many others, in the context of war and State violence.

The war context should not be forgotten as it is propitious ground for the articulation of narrator and compiler in what John Beverley calls "an ideological figure or *ideologeme*", ie. a figure which represents the possibility of union of a radicalized intelligentsia and the poor and working classes of a country (71). That *testimonio* gives voice to the voiceless, "in such a way that the intellectual or professional, usually of bourgeois or petit bourgeois background, is interpolated as being part of, and dependent on, the "people" without at the same time losing his or her as an intellectual (31)" is a fact that cannot be overemphasised. Without denying the inescapable contradictions and conflict inherent to this relation, the focus here is not on the difference between the subaltern and the compiler, but on the sense of of "mutuality" that is thus produced and which allows for the production of the testimonial genre (33).

One of the questions that has been intensely addressed in the discussions of *testimonio* is how orality and writing are by necessity

negotiated within this relationship of mutuality. Conversely, this is a question which is mainly absent from the discussion of Dalit testimonial narratives, authored as they are, by Dalits who have migrated and settled down in print culture. At present and with few exceptions, this migration seems to be a one way road, as Dalit travellers who chose to walk down the path towards education and literariness find it particularly difficult to go back to the jati without the deep sense of ambiguity and alienation discussed above. Education amongst the subaltern as it stands in India today, seems to be an inevitably individualizing experience which produces new inequalities and tensions and thus risks fragmenting the Dalit community (Ciotti, 2006). Above all, it is an ideology associated to social, economic and cultural capital which brings about consumption patterns and life-styles that clash with traditional practices of oral cultures. Today, three generations after the implementation of reservation policies, one of the serious divides within Dalit communities is to be found between the large number of illiterate members and those with varying levels of education.⁶ If in the past only Brahmin priests had the authority to read the sacred scripts and preside over rituals of worship, today it is the educated Sanskrit-literate Dalits who are called upon. This might seem a liberating state of affairs, except that in a predominantly oral society, this new practice marginalizes older or poorer members who might have the practical knowledge to officiate but not the status quo of his educated brother. From a Latin American perspective, the question is whether the figure of unlettered Dalit intellectuals is relevant in the Indian context. Dalit authorities who, like the Andean *apumisayoq* or the Mayan elders who Rigoberta evokes with reverence in her *testimonio*, are intellectuals with no scholarly education, but who, having been locally trained in their cultures' oral tradition and having accumulated orally transmitted knowledge, hold the intellectual and moral authority and prestige that lettered Amerindians lack within the same community (Montoya, 1997).

As the Latin American narrator at the time of telling her or his story is still firmly rooted in *campesino* soil and oral culture, the identity conflict which pervades Dalit narratives is not apparent in *testimonio*. The rooting is not just social and cultural. It is physical, it is corporeal. In Menchus words, it is the heart and the navel which are buried in

that soil. Hence, it is the middle class compiler who will need to migrate to the narrator's *campesino* world rather than the other way round. Poniatowska's complying with Borquez' request that she climbs to her roof top shack and take the hens for a walk before every session, and Burgos participating in the daily tortilla making ritual with Menchú, are both illustrations of the kind of commitment which the mediator needs to make in order to meet the narrator in his or her grounds, and not the other way around.⁷ The figure is equally valid for *Viramma*. In the introduction to the English translation of the text, Josiane Racine describes how she went to Viramma's *ceri* outside the boundaries of the village, and how meeting her interlocutor involved sitting and listening to her repertoire of songs, meeting her family and eventually developing a long life relationship. The journey undertaken to meet the narrator is also linguistic. For in these texts great care is taken by the compiler to remain as faithful as possible to the oral tradition and rhythms of the narrator's culture. Steeped as Viramma is in her traditional Paraiyar way of life, with all the oppression and abuse that this implies, the discourse captured in the text strikes the reader for its particularly vibrant, proud, lively chords. This is surprising given the context of unspeakable violence endured by a Paraiyar, and in particular a Paraiyar woman. If in Viramma there is room for the kind of joy and celebration which the reader misses in *Joothan* and *Tirakrit*, it is because at the moment of narration there is no sense of alienation from her oral the community nor from community's form of language. Viramma, at the time of speaking, is a Paraiyar who continues with her life struggle as an unreconstructed Paraiyar.

Folklore specialists suggest that India is still to a large extent an oral society which operates within the participatory, practical and dialogical modes of orality, but that scholars are generally more interested in studying written discourses (Handoo, 2006). Dalit life has traditionally found its highest expressions in those oral traditions like folk songs, riddles, proverbs, rituals, spectacle, poetry and folklore, which is the language of Viramma, but which have been sidelined by and large not only by academics but also by middle class Dalit writers of testimonial narratives. These oral expressions are also the sources which Bama taps with particularly contagious energy and gusto in her three books *Karukku*, *Sangati* and *Kishumbukaan*. Bama's life

trajectory is important to understand her poetics. As narrated in *Karikku*, she left her village for high school and then college to finally enter a Catholic convent, where she was able to live a comfortable life as a nun. However, gnawed by the guilt of her individual escape from poverty, she derobes and goes back to her village to settle down as a teacher, this time assuming her female Dalit identity without any ambivalence or guilt. As it turns out, it is this very act and mode of returning which marks her writing as a veritable passage to freedom. The return journey that Bama makes is both bold and unusual in the panorama of Dalit testimonial writers. Bama's journey back accounts for her choice of spoken Dalit Tamil not only for her characters, but also for her narrators. For it is with, and through this language that is considered obscene, vulgar and ungrammatical by many, that Bama stages her option of reinventing herself as a Dalit woman. Writes M.S.S. Pandian: "In a spirit of defiance it [her literary language] obviously challenges the authority of literacy over orality, a divide which was ratified and nourished by Tamil Saivism... But at an equally important plane, it is an effort by Bama to break free from her proficiency in standardized written Tamil, a result of her privileged education in schools and colleges, and to lose herself in the community of Dalits" (Pandian, 132).

For ideologues Raj Gauthaman and Unjairajan Dalit literature is a great vehicle for reclaiming Dalit culture as an alternative to mainstream Hindu print culture, and in this sense it is seen as the harbinger of a 'politics of liberation'. What Bama offers, I suggest, is a full blown 'poetics of liberation' which has orality as its major ideological and structural support. Instead of a narrative of relentless community oppression channelled through the voice of a single, educated, middle class narrator, Bama offers, as Pandian notes, "a site for the criss-crossing of multiple voices" (133), a splendid chorus of resilient, sharp-tongued women, old and young, who sing, banter, quarrel, whisper and gossip as they go about their daily lives working and having babies in the fields under the scorching sun, cooking, eating, collecting wood, fetching water, bathing, dancing, spitting, playing tricks on each other and telling stories, lots of stories. This is a strong, proud chorus which at one stroke erases the authorial I of the autobiography in irreverent, carnivalesque. Bakhtinian notes. The language of the female body as sung by Bama's

confident choristers, with its loud expletives, its frequent naming of genitals and its sexual innuendoes, functions as an effective instrument to enact a day to day parodic struggle against authority of all hues, whether of violent Dalit husbands who are “only fit to drink a woman’s farts (61)” or of upper caste women who “submit to their husbands like cobras shrinking back into their boxes (67)”.

In this life of relentless toil, poverty and domestic violence (“we only toil in fields and in the homes until our vaginas shrivel !!” (7)) endured on a day to day basis by Pariyar women, there is no time for self pity. The narrator’s grandmother, Vellaiyamma, a resilient and proud story teller who refuses to be crushed by her oppressors tells the story of her daughter, married off when still a child, who, after having “seven, eight babies in a row (10)” was beaten to death by her own husband. The grief, located in the very centre of a mother’s body, is still deep: “My womb, which gave birth to her, is still on fire (10)”, but instead of dwelling in the emotions of loss and beating her chest in despair, she closes the story with a simple admission of guilt conveyed in the visual, unambiguous language of fables: “I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat (10)”. The multilogic, participatory mode of orality prevalent in Dalit society is always at work in Bama’s text. When Vellaiyamma compares the white pigs that she has seen in the back of the church to her own black pigs, explaining that it is because the nuns rear them “on wheat and mild powder and biscuits” and not “eating shit like our pigs (12)” one of her interlocutors interrupts to complain about the fibbing: “She seems to think we are all just stupid cunts here (13)”. Although the narrator stands back to reflect on the “ugly” words used by Dalit women in their quarrels, and of why they should “derive a sort of bitter comfort using these terms of abuse which are actually names of their body parts (68)”, there is no sense of disgust, shame, or alienation, only sadness for what she interprets as a sign of sexual frustration. As the accent in *Sangati* is not in the past of oppression but in the present of resistance, the narrative moves forward, not backwards, revealing in the process new forms of struggle in day to day oral, parodic communication. Writes Bama in the preface to the English translation : “*Sangati* changed me as well ... the urge grew to demolish the troubles and to live happily. To bounce like a ball that has been hit, and not to curl up and collapse because of

the blow (vii)". This oppositional portrait of life written in a specifically oral female language often suppressed by the deep sense of modesty and propriety that is at work in the Indian public sphere, is indeed empowering and transformative.

Recently, a student in a Latin American Testimonio seminar at San Marcos University in Lima argued in class that the genre was not in the least counter hegemonic because once the narrator's oral discourse is processed through the machinery of print culture it stops challenging the privileging of literacy over orality, and that thereby it submits to the hegemony of writing and colonial values. One could counter-argue that a degree of negotiation between orality and writing is essential in the context of processes of cultural modernization, and that print capitalism remains one of the most effective instruments for community building projects. However, Bama's work gives another turn to the screw with its triggering of further questions regarding the emergence of new organic intellectuals as agents in that negotiation. As the classic Latin American dual *ideologeme* of middle class compiler-subaltern is condensed in the figure of one single Dalit narrator-compiler who becomes herself or himself a "site for the criss-crossing of multiple voices", new and promising grounds for rethinking the concept of cultural mediation in India seem to be emerging with extraordinary force.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 An interesting development within the Dalit Christian community is the recent emergence of a Dalit Liberation Theology which shares a number of themes with the Latin American Liberation Theology which arose in 1968 in Chimbote (Peru), including a reinterpretation of the Exodus with Dalits taking the place of God's chosen people, the view that Jesus himself was a Dalit or outcaste, and the highlighting of the experience of suffering as foundational concept for a theological understanding of Jesus.
We Were Making History collects the memories of women agricultural labourers who participated in the communist-led uprising (1945-1951) which started with hundreds of peasants revolting against the Nizam of Hyderabad and which eventually involved three million people in Andhra Pradesh.
- 2 *Sister, are you still here ?* (1977) is the prison diary of Akhtar Baluch, a Sindhi woman prisoner held in Pakistani jails in 1970 for participation in the protest against the detention of Sindhi nationalist and peasant leaders; *Hanyaman* (1989) is the prison memoir of communist party activist Joya Mitra and Meenakshi Sen's *Jailer Bhutor Jail*, (1993) is another prison testimony of the Naxalite period.
- 3 Sarah Beth explores national themes and motifs which go beyond ancient mythology into modern India, where the lives of Dalit heroes of independence, like Matadin Banghi, are told, and where Ambedkar, not Nehru nor Gandhi, is held as the first father of the Indian nation. Although Beth's study is focused on Dalit Hindi literature, pamphlet literature abounds in other Dalit communities and languages as well.

5. Indigenous resistance to the new order imposed by the Andean invaders is well documented, from the ill fated movement led by the last Inca Tupac Amaru in Vilcabamba, near Macchu Picchu, to the numerous messianic revolts led, amongst others, by Juan Santos Atahualpa and José Gabriel Condorcanqui, in the 18th century. Later in the 19th and 20th centuries the resistance was carried on first by montoneros and later by the armed struggle of *campesinos* in the Southern Andes. In his now classic *Europa y el país de los Incas : la utopía Andina*, (Lima, Tarea, 1986) the Peruvian historian Alberto Flores Galindo, explores how the indigenous Andean communities of Peru read the Christian Bible in the light of messianic interpretations. Thus the resurrection of Christ was seen as the return of the Inca and of its people, to whom the Spanish ill submit, thus inverting the social order once again. Messianic utopias are re-enacted in the Taki-onkoy and in the myths of Inkarni and the Pachacuti, amongst others.
6. See Yadav, Manohar's "Dalit 'Sahibs' and Masses", 2003, where he claims that despite reservation policies Dalit culture is still largely oral. Deccan Herald, 28 June, 2003
7. Although Burgos meets Menchú in her Paris apartment, it is evident in Burgos' introduction that the effort to cross the cultural barrier between her own metropolitan culture and Rigoberta's own campesino culture was principally Burgos'. Hence the tortilla making ritual is a symbol of Menchú's trust of Burgos.

SUBALTERN NARRATIVE AND POLITICAL SOLIDARITY
IN THE TESTIMONIAL GENRE IN
LATIN AMERICA AND INDIA

Over the last three decades the *testimonio* has emerged as a unique form of literary and cultural expression of collective struggles from below. It has claimed its unique generic location vis à vis the tumultuous political histories of Latin America and India. The *testimonio* is different from all pre-existing forms of expression like the novel, historiography and autobiography, and the unique specificity of the oral *testimonio* is that it produces a poetics of transculturalism due to the negotiations across linguistics and cultural boundaries that take place within its textual space. The significance of this genre for contemporary politics is that it embodies a vital relationship between subaltern narrative and political solidarity.

The *testimonio* by definition or by its very name suggests that it is not a fictional narrative but is an account of real events. The novel on the other hand is a fictional narrative and has no claims to verumity. However, history is the narrative of real incidents too. Yet the *testimonio* is different from history as well. While the *testimonio* comprises eye witness accounts of real incidents, history is not usually written by its witnesses in the present but by posterity. Though the history of an age may often be written by its contemporaries there still remains certain very distinct differences between the *testimonio* and history. The prime difference lies in the claim to objectivity that is almost always inherent within history and almost always challenged by the *testimonio*. That nothing can be objective is one of the prime factors that the *testimonio* seeks to prove¹ as we shall see later. History, even if about the subalterns of a society, or a “history

from below' is rarely written by the marginalised sections of the society. Whereas the chief claim of the *testimonio* is that it is an articulation of the marginalised people's own perspectives on society and politics. The biographical genre narrates lives of exceptional individuals, while hagiography mostly comprises elevated narratives of the lives of individual saints, heroes, leaders and the like. The *testimonio* deals with the lives of a people as a collective, with the lives of the ordinary.

The genre of autobiography comes closest to the *testimonio*, and can also narrate lives of common people. But the *testimonio* is drastically different from autobiography in numerous ways and actually calls for a contrast with the latter. The attempt to compare the *testimonio* with the autobiography reminds one of Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of differential identity and his claim that anything can be better understood in comparison with and in contrast to other things. Autobiography and the autobiographical novel are essentially conservative modes in the sense that they imply that individual triumph over circumstances is possible in spite of obstacles. Autobiography deals with an individual of the middle or upper class or expecting to be a part of those classes, the specular effect of confirming and authorizing his or (less so) her situation of relative social privilege. *Testimonio*, by contrast, always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the readers' world must be brought into question. In the autobiography the author, narrator and protagonist have an identical relationship. Identity can never really be established except as a matter of intention, an honest intention which warrants the truth of the narrator. In testimonial literature on the other hand the protagonist is often not an individual but a collective, the western notion of the author is disoriented, and often the presence of the interlocutor problematises the unlinear continuum between the author, narrator and protagonist.

Pascal in the 1960s tried to define the autobiography in terms of the seriousness of the author, his personality and intention in his telling. But in the *testimonio* the personality of a community, and not of an individual, is more important. The western notion of autobiography emphasizes that the autobiographical text is not just a chronology of dates but an expression of the author's hitherto unknown

techniques. The *testimonio* on the other hand engages with the interests and emotions of an entire community. From the middle of the 19th century till the 20th century a romantic attitude to the expression of one's self prevailed in the western paradigm. Though there were transitional modes in this romantic idea of the self in the realist and modernist eras too, but without going into the details of these, we can broadly and loosely generalise to say that each individual self was thought to possess an unified selfhood, reflective of a universal selfhood, and as an expression of human nature. This excessive preoccupation with the self and its proliferation is an obvious derivative of western bourgeois individualism. This individualism, in its turn, can sprout only in the context of western capitalist economy and society.

The reason for the special appeal of autobiography is the fascination with the self and its profound and endless mysteries. The *testimonio*, on the contrary concerns itself with the community and its profound, endless struggle. Since the 1980's the notion that autobiography can be only of one type has been challenged. People of various communities have been inclined to write autobiography in their own ways. Thus it has been viewed as something that aids the diversification of culture and subjects. Autobiography has seen an excessive productivity, but within its generic constrictions. However, through its appeal to different communities, the autobiography has shown considerable formal multiplicity. In 1809 Robert Southey coined the term autobiography. Till 1830 the term self biography was popular. Even earlier St Augustine used the term confessions for his autobiographical account. Writing autobiography became a way of attaining literary legitimacy and a desired subjectivity. The *testimonio* however, becomes a means of attaining subjectivity for an entire subjugated subaltern community. Autobiography became equated with a developmental narrative which orders time and personality according to a purpose and role. Thus the more chronological structure of diary could no longer fulfill the function of autobiography. The *testimonio* orders the personality of a community and the purpose more often than not is one of inspiration, activism and revolution.

Jacques Derrida says, "As soon as a genre announces itself one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not ask impunity." (1996, 157). But the *testimonio*, in the very fact that

it transcends genre-boundaries, becomes a genre by itself. Fredric JAMESON asserts, "Genres are always cultural constructions themselves and operate not as ideal type but genre has a more pragmatic function in that it will be one of the ways writers will use to try to ensure that their text is received and read appropriately." (1984, 279). But for the people who produce the testimonial accounts it is not that they have many genres at their disposal and choose according to their intention ; rather if they have to convey something to the literate world it is only through *testimonio* that they can do so. In 1979 Paul de Man in his post-structuralist intervention in the genre of autobiography wrote a radical essay where he signaled "the end of autobiography" (de Man, 1979, 920). He identifies autobiography with a linguistic dilemma which is liable to be repeated every time the author makes himself the subject to his own understanding. The author reads himself in the text but what he is seeing in this self-reflexive or specular moment is a figure or a face called into being literary. In the *testimonio* the author-narrator makes his own community and its struggles the subject of his/her understanding and faces not a linguistic but a social dilemma. In an autobiography the author literarises his own self. He tries to express his self, which is accessible to him without language, through the mediation of language. Thereby he faces a linguistic dilemma. The case with the *testimonio* is that the society, the struggle that are available to the testimonialista, extraneous to the linguistic paradigm, are called into being literary. The testimonialista initiates the process of literarising the society and its struggles, the process of understanding these struggles through a linguistic mediation. And this time it is not just a linguistic dilemma. The difficulty arises not just from the linguistic tension stemming out of the effort to literarise a non-script society; but the real conflict here is articulated as a social dilemma which springs out of the attempt to represent one society and culture to another. This issue would be further taken up in the section on the *testimonio* as a transcultural product.

In 1955 Robbert Smith suggested that as a field of interpretation, autobiographical criticism and theory are conflictual and miscellaneous. Since in recent times autobiographical criticism and theorisations about it have been extremely diverse such a miscellany has been created. The field of autobiographical theory is said to be diverse because the

autobiography has been used for various political purposes. The production of autobiography and the polyvalent usage of the autobiographical form have led him to say this. The diverse use of the autobiographical narrative has numerous political implications. But this is never really radical. The *testimonio* has radicalised this usage and has taken it to an altogether different paradigm. One politically charged use of the autobiographical form is the feminist intervention in autobiographical criticism. From the 1980's feminists have been concerned with autobiographies of women. Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debates precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subjects. Women's autobiographies are significant for feminism because there remains a political imperative for women to constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never ending objects. *Testimonios*, mostly written by women, function not only in articulating a subject position for their communities, but also for the women of that community.

Written *testimonios* are those which are written by a participant in a community struggle whereas oral *testimonios* are narrated by such a participant and scripted and edited by some others. Such oral *testimonios* are produced, often, because the participant is not a literate person or has either no inclination or time to write. Such *testimonios* are a transcultural product of interaction between the narrator of collective struggles, and the interviewer / editor, usually from another culture. The dynamics of scripting and editing and translating becomes very important for such processes. Oral narratives include interviews, oral history, life stories and *testimonios*. Interviews or life stories don't necessarily concern some collective struggle; on the other hand oral history need not be a participant's account. The oral *testimonio* is a participant's account of a collective struggle. While the autobiography is a product of an individualist society and is founded on the western hegemonic discursive practices, the *testimonio* is a counter hegemonic product of the third world communitarian societies. Every genre reveals some unique dimensions of human experience, to every culture. The very emergence of the *testimonio* points at the historic vacuum that existed before its arrival, specially with respect to articulation of collective struggles from the point of view of the participants.

The Articulation of an Alternative Generic Representation of Collective Struggle

Social struggle gives rise to new forms of literature due to the inadequacy of their representation in existing narrative forms. Raymond Williams says, "Very few if any of us could write at all if certain forms were not available. And then we may be lucky we may find forms which correspond to our experience." (1958, 128). In an age such as our own one of transition or having the potential for transition from one mode of production to another, it is quite usual to experience the emergence of new forms of cultural and literary expression that embody, in more or less thematically explicit and formally articulated ways, the social contending for power in the world today. One of the most important new forms of cultural and literary expressions of today is the *testimonio*. As Guegelberger says, "The desire called *testimonio* was the desire called third world literature" (1996, 1). But as Panjabi argues,

The *testimonio* did not develop from a vacuum, it belongs and is a development from traditions of political literary texts that prevailed in the Indian and Latin American contexts. (2004, 126)

The movements against imperialism and dictatorship in Latin America by left of centre political parties in the 1970's marked a shift towards the socialist mode, and it was within this context that the *testimonio* emerged as a genre :

One may have in mind here, by analogy to the role of the bourgeoisie in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, not only the struggle of working people everywhere against exploitation, but also in contingent ways movements of ethnic or national liberation, the women's liberation movement, poor and oppressed peoples' organizations of all types, the gay rights movements, the peace movement, ecological activism, and the like. One of these new forms in embryo, I will argue, is the kind of narrative text that in Latin American Spanish has come to be called *testimonio* ... By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. *Testimonio* may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature,

others not autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella *testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or factographic literature. (Beverly : 1996, 24-25).

Testimonio is by nature a protean and demotic form not yet subject to legislation by a normative literary establishment, and hence any attempt to specify a generic definition for it should be considered at best provisional, at worst repressive. But for practical purposes we can say that *testimonio* began to coalesce as a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further developed in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalized cultural radicalism of that decade (Beverly, 1996, 25).

The roots of *testimonio* go back to the importance in previous Latin American literature of a series of non-fictional narrative texts such as the war diaries (*diarios de campana*) of, for example, Bolivar or Martí. *Testimonio* also drew on the sort of direct-participant account, usually presented without any literary or academic aspirations whatever (although often with political ones), represented by a book such as Che Guevara's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (1959), one of the defining texts of 1960s leftist sensibility throughout the Americas. The success of Che's account (with its corresponding manual, *Guerrilla Warfare*) inspired in Cuba a series of direct-participant *testimonios* by combatants. There began to emerge throughout the Third World, and in very close connection to the spread of armed struggle movements and the Vietnam War, a literature of personal witness and involvement designed to make the cause of these movements known to the outside world, to attract recruits, to reflect on the successes or failure of the struggle. The intentionality of the narrator is paramount in these narratives.

The situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself. Unlike the novel, *testimonio* promises by definition to be primarily concerned with a truth claim rather than literariness. *Testimonio*, in other words, is an instance of the New Left and feminist slogan that "the personal is the political". *Testimonio* is not so much concerned with the life of a "problematic hero" - the term Luckacs used to describe the nature

of the hero of the bourgeois novel - as with a problematic collective social situation that the narrator lives with or alongside others. The situation of the narrator in *testimonio* is one that must be representative of a social class or group. The narrator in *testimonio*, speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group, approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming his hierarchical and patriarchal status.

Another way of putting this would be to define *testimonio* as a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative. The metonymic function of the narrative voice of the *testimonio* that is latent in the form is part of its narrative convention. *Testimonio* is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences. Thus, one common formal variation on the classic first-person singular *testimonio* is the polyphonic *testimonio* made up of accounts by different participants in the same event. The dominant formal aspect of the *testimonio* is the voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an "I" that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention. This powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject itself, which we are meant to experience as the voice of the real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire, not of an individual, but of a community, not to be silenced or defeated but to impose itself on an institution of power like literature from the position of the excluded or the marginal. So it is the "we" rather than the "I" that speaks to us.

Testimonio involves a sort of erasure of the function, and thus also of the textual presence, of the "author", which by contrast is so central in all major forms of bourgeois writing since the Renaissance, so much so that our very notions of literature and the literary are bound up with notions of the author, or, at least, of an authorial intention. The author has been replaced in *testimonio* by the function of a "compiler" or "activator". There seems implicit in this situation both a challenge and an alternative to the patriarchal and elitist function the author plays in class-divided and in sexually and racially divided societies. The erasure of authorial presence in the *testimonio* together with its nonfictional

character make possible a different kind of complicity, which we might call fraternal and this being the indication of an alternative narration reflective of the alternative economy and culture of the Third World. The relation of narrator and compiler in the production of a *testimonio* can function as an ideological figure or ideogeme for the possibility of union of a radicalized intelligentsia and the poor and working classes of a country, a union between the elite intellectual and the organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense.

Testimonio gives voice in literature to a previously "voiceless", anonymous, collective popular-democratic subject, the "people", but in such a way that the intellectual or professional, the editor-collaborator of the text, usually of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois background, is interpolated as being part of and dependent on the "people", without at the same time losing his or her identity as an intellectual. It suggests as an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity. A *Testimonio* has the potential of placing on the agenda, within a given country, problems of poverty and oppression, for example in rural areas that are not normally visible in the dominant forms of representation. But *testimonio's* incorporation into the academically sanctioned field of literature often occurs at the expense of relativising its moral and political urgency. Often a politico-academic binary is presented before a *testimonio*: either it should retain its political charge, the revolutionary rhetoric, the subversive elements and point the finger at the established power hierarchy of which the academia is but an active part, and by doing all these practically relinquish its possibility of being seriously considered by the same academia whose political biases it is bringing to the open; or it should claim a place in academia, along with all other genres, at the cost of reducing its vociferous revolutionary claims and its scathing criticism of the established, prevailing political order. The *testimonio* is confronted with a situation in which it cannot question the politics of knowledge construction and be considered a legitimate form of knowledge at the same time. In disallowing this, mainstream academia and dominant political structures serve to reduce *testimonio's* political charge. Academia and the existing canons of literature, are also an apparatus of alienation and domination. They alienate the majority population in many contexts where the canonical literature and the life-struggles

of the people point in completely opposite directions. This may and does happen in many contexts because canonical literature in many societies is produced by the people of the society who are far removed from the life-practices of the majority subalterns. Literature may also serve as a tool for domination if it propagates the mainstream hegemonic values of a society. The *testimonio* puts into question the existing institution of literature as an ideological apparatus of alienation and domination, while it simultaneously constitutes itself as a new form of literature.

Testimonio appears as an extra literary or an anti literary form of discourse. This is precisely the basis of both its aesthetic and political appeal. *Testimonio* is a new form of narrative literature in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy. Miguel Barnett says, "The lessons of Latin American history in the 1960s give a devastating impulse to works of testimony. I believe the Cuban revolution with its powerful organic influence, provided all the literature of this type with a rejuvenating nutrient." The *testimonio*, through oral discourse, can embody the collective memory of a community, as Barnett further says,

I aspire to be a sounding board for the collective memory of my country. For that purpose I resort to oral discourse, to myths and to the anthropomorphic Cuban fable : a subject whose purest expression was elaborated by Alejo Carpentier in The Kingdom of This World. (1994, 203).

This collective memory which Barnett talks about is the main driving force behind *testimonios*. The people of an oral society, who have been robbed of their history by the history writing and history writing technologies of the literate societies, can be reclaimed and historicised and represented only through the *testimonio*. In this regard Barnett again says,

The only desire I have is to reveal the human heart, the heart of the men that traditional historiography has marked with the sign of a proverbial fatalism by writing them off as people without a history. (1994, 205).

It is this history and a desire to reveal it that inspires the writing of *testimonios*. Breaking the hegemony of the west and that of western

genics can be seen when Barnett writes, "I no longer believe in genres." (1994, 206).

The relationship between *testimonio*, truth, exploitation of an oppressed community and official history is very complex and nuanced. In this regard George Yudice says,

Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (1991, 48).

Gopal Guru holds that women's *testimonio* can be seen as carrying positive emancipatory potential. He also says,

The less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others. (Guru, 1995, 548).

The subaltern in a power-ridden social order always has more knowledge than the hierarchichaly favoured group, because of the fact that the dominated not only knows oneself but also the dominant for its own survival. Upon the dominated's knowledge of the dominant depends his/her chances of reformulating the strategies of survival every moment. This reminds us of Hegel's master slave dialogues. In it Hegel shows how the slave knows more about the master than the master knows about him. This is so because while it is a matter of choice for the master to know about the slave, knowledge of the master is obligatory for the slave for his own survival. A celebration of plural practices of feminism can be seen in the Latin American and Indian testimonial narratives.

The *testimonio* also serves a therapeutic purpose. One can recognise three separate, district levels of witnessing : the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

In listening to testimonies, and in working with survivors and their children, I came to believe..... The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. (Laub, 1994, 78).

There are, in the reminiscences within the *testimonios*, unimpeded ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. The imperative to tell the story is inhabited by the impossibility of telling it and, therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails. None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivor-participants of a struggle who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed "external evil," which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events. So, the *testimonio*, as a subaltern narrative, provides the survivor-participants of the struggle with a space where they can tell their tale.

The Poetics of Transcultural Negotiations

Coming to the two texts of our concern, we see that both *We Were Making History* and *I, Rigoberta Menchú* are deeply influenced by communist ideology. Left based social organisations, communist ideologies and the people's movements from which these *testimonios* arose were in a state of perfect continuum in the Third World up until the 1980's. As Sharmila Rege says, "The Left Party based women's organizations highlighted economic and work related issues and also helped develop a critique of the patriarchal capitalist state." (1998, 47). Both the texts comprise the scripting of oral testimonial narratives of women. While the Indian text is a collection of testimonial accounts of many women involved in the Telengana armed peoples uprising in the 1940's, the Guatemalan text is the testimonial narrative of one woman in the 1970's. The struggle in Telengana took place in and around Indian independence. The main issues around which the struggle was being carried out was the question of ownership of farmland and the right over the agricultural produce of the land. In case of the struggle of the Mayans in the Guatemalan context it was more directly a political battle for survival of an indigenous community fought directly against the forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism. The struggle was waged on the issue of access

and ownership of land and mines and industries. It can also broadly be called a battle against neo-colonialism. The Guatemalan struggle was more like an independence movement of the Guatemalan Mayan opposition against the rightist dictatorial government while the Telengana struggle was more of a communist struggle of the peasants. But in each case the text becomes the autobiography of a community caught in the context of change and struggle. The editors of *We Were Making History* acknowledge the influence of *Sandino's Daughters* and other Latin American *testimonios*. In this regard Kavita Panjabi comments

"This instance reflects the direct influence of Central American women's *testimonios* on Indian feminist historiography as a precedent and persuasive force, the *testimonio*. What is also important is that there was ready ground here for the reception of this influence, given the strong parallels in the political and historical experiences of women in these cases... works are situated in the historical context of crises in nationalism in contemporary postcolonial societies, and the increasing articulation of the role of women in these struggles." (1991, 128).

Only through women is the most comprehensive articulation of subalternity possible. In a patriarchal framework even within the subaltern, oppressed community the patriarchal order can be seen to be quite as much in effect as elsewhere. In such a situation the women of the exploited society are always doubly or triply, internally as well as externally oppressed. Where this is the scenario, the women, inhabiting the most subaltern position in the community, can articulate the subaltern subject position the best. These texts, inspite of narrating the role and position of the women in the struggles, become accounts of the collective struggles of the communities. In *We Were Making History* the chapters are divided along the testimonial accounts of each person while in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* chapters are divided according to the various stages in Rigoberta's life or the various stages of the Mayan peoples struggle.

Since, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a trans-linguistic & trans-cultural text the usage of language and linguistic registers are very significant for Rigoberta. She says, "I learned Spanish out of necessity." (Pg. 162). The chapter names had been ascribed by the editor and this results in a diffusion of focus. Though the chapters, 'Death of Her Friend by Poisoning' or 'Kidnapping and Death of Rigoberta's Mother' by their titles make us expect the stories about these deaths, on reading them

we find that how the deaths effected Rigoberta are narrated. How such deaths, in a generalized sense. Affect a community are narrated. How the community reacts to these deaths is narrated. These are stages in the life of the struggle. These deaths, or any death or loss within the space of the struggle are never really personal losses; rather, these are politically significant in the struggle.

The interaction between Menchú and Elizabeth Burgos Debray reminds one of the dialectic of master and slave or colonizer and colonized, of the interlocutor manipulating or exploiting the material the informant provides to suit her own cosmopolitan political, intellectual and aesthetic predilections. In the creation of the testimonial text, control of representation does not just flow one way, someone like Rigoberta Menchú is also in a sense exploiting her interlocutor in order to have her story reach and influence an international audience, something that as an activist for her community she sees in quite utilitarian terms as a political task. Editorial power not only belongs to the compiler but to Menchú as well. She fears that her narrative could be used against herself or her people and hence remains silent at places and says for example.

I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret, I'm still keeping secret what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, find out all our secrets. (pg. 247)

At certain crucial junctures Rigoberta says that she won't tell anything more. These are those places where she is, in the flow of narrating or telling, about to tell certain very basic features of their struggle or of organising themselves or of their everyday life-practices. These are places where there are risks that the strategies of survival or subversive strategies of the subaltern community might get leaked to the counter insurgent forces of the C.I.A. Though there are no direct references or proofs that the counter-insurgent forces are those of the C.I.A. but in a world of neo-colonialism dominated supremely by the United States of America it is but easy for one to surmise that the international intelligence wing of that country would obviously play a crucial role to diffuse the revolutionary insurgence of the indigenous people in another country trying to liberate itself from the clutches of neo-

colonialism. It is in these places where Rigoberta draws the line. The CIA and other forces were always there to try and curb the revolutionary activities of the communities like Rigoberta's. To maintain their revolutionary cutting edge and subversive potential these communities had to eternally reformulate strategies of survival. Rigoberta stops her narration where there is even the slightest possibility of her community's survival strategies getting leaked to the capitalist-imperialist forces. For the Telengana revolutionaries the oppressive forces were represented by the Razakkars or the strongmen of the zamindars. The editor, in Rigoberta's text, edits the repetitions and thereby cuts down the real oral nature of the text. Rigoberta's silences often speak volumes. Both silences and repetitions on behalf of Rigoberta are narrative and textual and even survival strategies. These inclusions, exclusions and over emphasis creates a pattern in the text which is there for us to read and interpret politically. By tampering with any one of these the editor, if she does it, cuts down the real nature of the text. In *We Were Making History* also, the role of the editor is significant, because the editor has an active role in presenting before us the narrative in the form in which it is presented before us, but the editor's role is less intrusive[?]ding compared to the other text.

Dealing with the questions of inclusions and exclusions, repetitions and silences, one is quite naturally reminded of Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the subaltern speak', which presupposes that a subaltern subject whose voice has been recorded in print is no longer a subaltern because the speaking must enunciate the language of reason to be heard by western interlocutors. (Spivak, 1988, 271) That is, as Arturo Arias says,

Authentic discourse is a suppressed or hidden "truth" because of the Westerner's inability to comprehend it in its own terms; thus, subaltern subjects are forced to use the discourse of the colonizer to express their subjectivity. (2001, 75).

The most strategically planned elocution may elude the speaker's intentions because of the polysemy of language. When someone tries to reduce the multiple meanings of a discourse and ignores the slippages inherent in translation (in Rigoberta's case, from K'iche to Spanish to English), the polemics generated seem inevitable.

Political Solidarity and Subaltern Narrative

The testimonial account in oral *testimonios* brings up the relation between political solidarity and subaltern narrative. It announces the fact that only through the collaborative production of a *testimonio* can the subaltern speak her/his narrative in mainstream discourse. Political solidarity built on the basis of subalternity is communicated and reinforced through subaltern narrativisation, but with a simultaneous mitigation of authorial function due to the control exerted by the editor. Further, the narrator has to constantly negotiate the pressures of often divergent, Western and indigenous discourses. Political solidarity is thus achieved through the subaltern narrativisation; and this solidarity is narrativised in the subaltern narrative : the *testimonio*. In this context Panjabi remarks,

The *testimonio* is not seen as a substitute for historiography, but in terms of establishing a collective identity and consequences in terms of foreground in voices that have to be heard, in a genre yet unnamed in India. (2004, 128).

The collective nature of the political struggle is implied in the very title of *We Were Making History* and though the title *I, Rigoberta Menchú* emphasises the “I”, it takes on the dimension of “We” when Menchú says, “This is my testimony, my personal experience is the reality of the whole people” (Pg. 1). The *Testimonio* empowers subaltern subjects and is a tool for political agency. Doris Sommer quite rightly points out,

Rigoberta apparently appreciates testimony’s double duty : the message of liberation, and the medium of political persuasion. Menchú’s narrative condemns Guatemala’s Government and defends the Guerrilla movement. (2001, 237).

The community’s survival strategies are so very important to Rigoberta because, as she says, “We survive because of our communities” (Pg. 158) and this can actually be the crux of our understanding of the *testimonio* as a genre. The formation of the peasant communist organisation of the CUC in *Rigoberta* has parallels with the rise of the communist party in Telengana. In the account of Kandapalli Koteswaramma for example, we see how the Indian National Congress that had once made people

dream of national liberation became a statist force after independence and cooperated with the coercive arm of the state in suppressing local peasant uprisings. This can be paralleled with the 'Attack on the village by the Army' which is a chapter in Rigoberta's account. The phenomenon of attack on the revolting peasants by the state army is very common in any anti-statist revolution. Both in Guatemala and Telengana the army or police, being part of the repressive state apparatus, were used to quell the rebellions by means of brutal force. The police also wreaked enormous violence on the Telengana activists. In both the cases communist outfits were the only answer and way of retaliation. People's armed struggle against exploitation and oppression form the backbone of the two texts. That the struggle was an armed one is not very clearly spelt out in the text of Rigoberta but we can say that such a struggle could not but be violent and an armed one. These thematic commonalities are brought forth to highlight the fact that the subjects that are thematised finally become the generic markers of the *testimonio*; that is to say that if and only if the biography of a community caught in the vortex of change is thematised then and only then can the end product be called a *testimonio*. The struggle of a community, which is the theme of a *testimonio*, is also its generic marker. That is how the theme and generic location of a *testimonio* are linked.

How much politically committed women can be is evident from Koteswaramma's account in *We Were Making History* and from the chapter 'Women & Political Commitment' in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Koteswaramma was ideologically conscious, politically motivated and educated enough to read Marx's or Gorky's texts. But when we see the women in Akkirajupalli, we understand that even the illiterate, poor women of the villages were very articulate and conscious about their exploitation and ideologically committed to the cause of equal distribution. Ordinary village-women like Kondamma, Vajramma, Sadamma, Gollamallamma etc. recount their experiences of fighting the Razakkars to save their land. They all became active members of the communist party. The accounts of Jamalunisha Baji and Rajia Begum show us how the Muslims, though labeled Kafirs, were also equal participants in the Telengana struggle. They, being members of the communist party used to bring out Urdu and Persian progressive journals. Though they were from highly educated and elite backgrounds, they

worked among the peasants for the cause of the oppressed. In the account of Brij Rani Gour we see how an undercaste woman of the backward class wanted to join the social organizations and the women's organizations. How she joined the left unions and actively participated in the struggle for land and equality is narrated in her account. All these women's accounts become symbolic of the whole struggle of the whole people.

The testimonial texts help in raising consciousness about the movement. The *testimonios*, encoding ways and means and strategies of resistance and survival, become a necessary education for succeeding generations. *We Were Making History* serves the need of reclaiming women's history as a political intervention. If we look at the structure of the brief accounts we find that they are told in a matter of fact way, with the women being very conscious of their active political participation. These histories of the ordinary woman revolutionaries, which could not be expressed adequately in any other form or genre, find their specific and definite outlet through this *testimonio*. The small accounts of each woman give us a brief background of her family and then moves on to the level of historicizing the collective people's struggle and their role in it.

In her *testimonio*, Menchú speaks of her people's pain and their modes of resistance to Ladino oppression. She narrates this in the context of their struggle for land; Mayan rituals of birth, marriage, and death; the exploitative nature of plantation work; the death of two of her siblings from malnutrition and pesticides; her migration to the city; her experience of racism while she worked as a maid; the radicalization of many Mayas as a result of experiences similar to hers; the creation of self-defense organizations; their destruction by the army; the subsequent death by torture of most of their members, including Menchú's parents and brothers; and their survival through flight from the country. In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, one must acknowledge the force of the writing, its metonymicity, and its rhetorical devices as a "productive matrix" (Bhabha, 1994, 233) that circumscribes the social engagement of the Mayan subject and makes this struggle available to others as an objective of or for action.

Rigoberta's and the Tefengana women's *testimonios* denounce exploitation and set official history aright; they recover the unspeakable

of collective sufferings that would otherwise go untold. Memory and amnesia, willful and forced, negotiate with each other in the production of a *testimonio*. Elzbieta Skłodowska emphasises 'the role of memory in the mediation of telling, writing, reading, and critical interpretation' (2001, 251). That these *testimonios* are of women is particularly significant in their ability to bring out the history of collective struggle. As Paul Thomson says,

whereas men consider the life they have lived as their own, women by contrast talk of their lives typically in terms of relationships, including parts of other life stories as their own. (Thomson, 1988, 139)

This recounting of one's life as part of a larger group is a characteristic of third world communities, and anti-individualist in nature. We see the appropriation of stories other than her own in Rigoberta's narrative and this is particularly obvious in her rendering of family lore. Fragments of family history are recounted by Rigoberta out of what she had learned from her parents.

The *testimonio* delineates events, not in isolation, but in the context of the community's struggles. The *testimonio* stands for the experience of all the people of the community. The synecdochical function is performed in the *testimonio* by the narrative technique. The narrative technique is the only tool at the disposal of the *testimonialista*, since the units as they appear are the work of the editor. The individual narrative sequences depend on Menchú's skills and intentionality as a narrator. For example, in the chapters entitled 'the torture and death of her little brother, burnt alive in front of members of his family and community' and 'kidnapping and death of Rigoberta's mother' Menchú uses excruciating detail to describe the torture and murder of her mother and brother. Here she deviates from the matter of fact narration and creates a hallucinatory and intense portrayal of the torture of the Guatemalan army. Recalling Rigoberta Menchú's narrative proposition, the meaning of her *testimonio* lies not in its uniqueness but in its ability to stand for the experience of her community as a whole. Here the deaths may not be that of her biological brother or mother, but the death of those she may relate to as brother and mother in her community. So truth cannot be reached and should not be sought in the *testimonio* on the individual level. Rather, veracity can be found on a broader

communitarian basis. Because the authorial function has been erased or mitigated, the relationship between authorship and forms of individual and hierarchial power in bourgeois society has also changed. *Testimonio* represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be *testimonio* and becomes something else if not autobiography.

Testimonio always does talk of political motivation and intervention. We can see this once more in the chapter titled 'The Kidnapping and Death of Rigoberta's Mother' where we see how politically motivated a woman of the earlier generation could be. Rigoberta says of her mother

My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer (pg. 196).

Menchu's mother does not construct a feminist theoretical discourse, rather, her life itself is a "living testimony" in Quiche (or K'iche, as currently spelled). What is more, the activism she proposes can only be understood in the context of Mayan cultural practices, since women "join the struggle in their own way." Menchú may display an ingenuous certitude about her mother's qualities, but there is no simplistic leftist or feminist rhetoric. So *testimonio* goes beyond leftist-feminist rhetorics and culls out a place for itself, talking of political solidarity at a deeper grassroots level, and one should bear in mind that this solidarity is not imposed from above like ideology from without, but is something that comes from below, from the life-practices of these subaltern peoples.

The Maya's practice of catholicism was a form of mimicry that masked their cultural autonomy in a new, hybrid religious context. Rigoberta visualized a double task : To explain Mayan culture and subjectivity to the outside world and to argue for its rightful place in the Guatemalan opposition. These undertakings forced her into an inevitable duality : She had to embrace elements of Western discourse to make herself heard by her target audiences, but she also had to

guarantee the preservation and continuity of her Mayan identity, which was the validating element of her discourse.

The neo-colonial undertone can be clearly heard if one tries to see the parallels between the oppression of the Mayas in the 1980s by the Guatemalan army and the Spanish conquests of the 16th century on the one hand and the oppression of the Telengana peasant by the state police and the Zamindar's agents and the colonial oppression of the British on the other. Arturo Arias says that the *testimonio*, as a written means to begin exploring the contours of a collective identity, is a concrete historical genre that evolved in Latin America during the "guerrillista" period (1960-90), just as similar modes had evolved in other parts of the world during specific historical events, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Algerian war, or the Palestinian struggle for a homeland (Arias, 2001, 81). Homi Bhabha, among others, finds related expressions in Southeast Asia, and, of course, similar texts have appeared in Africa during that continent's numerous struggles for liberation from Western powers. In the Indian context too we can see similar thematic and generic expressions in the narratives of women in the Telengana movement, of Naxalite women's prison narratives such as Jaya Mitra's *Hannaman* and Meenakshi Sen's *Jailer Bhictor Jail*, and in the life narratives of Dalit women such as Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar. The *testimonio*, as a subaltern narrative, emanates from the political solidarities of the third world; on the other hand it builds up and ensures these very solidarities by virtue of being a subaltern narrative.

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RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ'S *TESTIMONIOS* AS THE
VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

"Our ancestors taught us that history is not made by one person alone"
"The only way to construct the historical memory of the people was
by writing."

--Rigoberta Menchú: *Rigoberta, nieta de los mayas*

Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), which received almost immediate recognition in 1983 with the Casa de las Americas award and then became known the world over in its English translation in 1984 as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman from Guatemala*, has been the centre of not only a controversy over issues of "authenticity" and "truth-content" but also is undeniably the most studied text in the context of debates on the genre of the *testimonio* in Latin America. After its introduction as part of the curriculum in Stanford, the veracity of Menchú's *testimonio* has been questioned by some anthropologists and literary critics in US academic circles, mainly David Stoll (1999) and Dinesh D'Souza, and has given rise to a rethinking of the generic boundaries of the *testimonio* itself, beyond the initial definitions offered by critics like John Beverly (1987 : 7-16) and George Yúdice (1991 : 15-31). The appearance of Menchú's second book *Rigoberta: Granddaughter of the Mayas* in 1998, categorised as a memoir and not a *testimonio* by Georg Gugelberger (1998 : 62-68) among others, has only heightened the controversy over the "crucial" concerns of how we are supposed to read not only Menchú's *testimonios* but also other *testimonios* of marginalised and subaltern groups — as documents of truth or as fabrications of an extremely imaginative mind, arising out of political expediency. Are we to read these books as Georg Gugelberger (1999 : 47-52) suggests

Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature, Volume XLVI, 2008-2009

as "texts that are closer to literature than to documentary"? Are we not to read these texts with the intention of sifting through the "traces of the real" in order to not only understand the context in which such *testimonios* arise but also to be able to go beyond issues of authenticity and veracity to read these as texts that challenge official histories and offer us an alternate view of "history from below"?

If we were to examine some of the charges made by David Stoll against Menchú, they seem so trivial that it seems more like a ploy to obfuscate the "real issues". Anyone familiar with Latin American history of the second half of the twentieth century, when most countries were ruled by bloodthirsty dictators, propped up with the overt or covert support of US imperialism can but ask some of the following questions : Is the genocide as described in Menchú's *testimonios* an exaggeration? Or is it a result of political expediency? Could it be, as Stoll suggests, a figment of her imagination? How do we react to the fact that, in Guatemala, hundreds of villages were destroyed, more than a hundred thousand civilians were massacred, exiled, displaced or simply made to disappear? How do we account for the fact that an absolute silence reigned while this genocide continued for more than thirty five years? Was it not Rigoberta Menchú's relentless campaign that drew attention to the genocide? What is so wrong about her decision to record her *testimonio* to Elizabeth Burgos in order to further her campaign, if at all she did it as consciously as some of her critics would have it? The main charges against Menchú now are that her *testimonio I, Rigoberta* is supposed to be a "political fabrication, a tissue of lies, and one of the greatest intellectual and academic hoaxes of the Twentieth Century" and is being denounced as "the stuff of classic Marxist myth." The second book, however, according to the same critic, is said to "highlight her *obvious* skills as a orator, does not reveal anything new, and shows her unmistakable "aura of unchallengeability", among other trivia. The debate continues. In this paper I do not propose to study either the authenticity of Menchú's *testimonios* nor go into all the charges raised by David Stoll, the American anthropologist, who has been Menchú's most virulent critic. This question has been sufficiently discussed by many critics in the book edited by Arturo Arias (2001) but to bring into focus the kind of issues that are at the crux of the so-called authenticity debate, it would be interesting to see what Marc Zimmerman has to say :

(...) the discrepancies that Stoll finds in Rigoberta's text can only be understood in the context of his agenda — to discredit Menchú and the peasant movement. What he really argues is that the conflict between the indigenous people and the military backed by the repressive state is not the real story behind the atrocities committed against the Indians, but that it was a dispute between the Indians themselves. In order to do so he shows that Menchú's narration does not correspond to the truth but that it is written based on her dogmatic indoctrination with the EGP... (2004)

Having stated that Stoll's agenda is quite clear I would now like to analyse and compare Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonios* I, *Rigoberta* and *Granddaughter of the Mayas* and look at some of the issues being raised by the Latin American *testimonio* as a genre in order to argue that the real issues are not about "authenticity" or "veracity" or even "literariness", but rather that the *testimonio* has come under attack because it raised uncomfortable questions about injustices and inequalities that are deep rooted in our societies and, more importantly, this is the easiest way to challenge it and deny it the space that it occupies today. The *testimonio* has attempted to fill in the gaps in dominant official histories and wrests a space for the marginal. The testimonial subject becomes a subject of history and articulates a collective memory as opposed to the individual one. In this article I would also examine the structure of a book like *Rigoberta : Granddaughter of the Mayas* to argue that it should be not read as her memoirs or an autobiography but rather a *testimonio* that responds to an immediate situation — although the generic distinctions between the autobiography, memoirs and a *testimonio* are increasingly blurred, if we are to think of books like Isabel Allende's *My Invented Country* (2003) or Giacond Belli's *The Country Under My Skin* (2003).

The *testimonio* as a genre came into being in Latin America as a political act of denunciation, an assertion against the atrocities and oppression faced by marginalised groups of people — slaves, workers, peasants and guerrilla fighters. The idea was to report an immediate event (with a sense of immediacy and urgency) in order to provoke in the reader a sense of solidarity with the speaker and thus it was a political act as it specifically sought to produce complicity in the reader. The writing or dictating of the *testimonio* itself was an opportunity to make heard

the collective voice of silenced marginalised groups. A member of the marginalised group attempts to speak as a part of and on behalf of a community to which he / she belongs and thus voices the concerns of the entire community and not just the individual. That is why speakers of *testimonios* like Rigoberta Menchú or Domitila Barrios de Chungara, even while narrating from the perspective of the individual, emphasise the plurality of experience; a sense of the collective clearly predominates over that of the individual. According to Miguel Barnet, the Cuban writer, who was not only the first to theorise on the genre but also the author of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, considered the first testimonial novel, the *testimonio* reworks traditional concepts of literature like realism, autobiography, the relationship between fiction and history. He says:

History will always appear through the significant, individual moments of marginalised persons. Testimonial literature will revise a mangled, deformed interpretation of the past to offer a vision from the perspective of the class struggle. Intentionality constitutes the very fabric of this kind of work. It looks at the marginalized, and quasi marginalized from the widest perspective ... (1994 : 204)

The 80s and the 90s were witness to a large corpus of testimonial writing from Latin America and this genre also became popular in other parts of the world so much so that the Dalit autobiography has been compared to this genre. It is only natural therefore that this of writing has undergone substantial changes in its form and content and from the initial definitions offered by Beverly (1987 : 9), in which he highlights the urgency of the moment of narration of a life experience such as repression, exploitation, marginalisation, etc. as well as the presence of a mediator precisely because the narrator is either illiterate or does not have access to the institutional circuits of journalistic or literary production. In his later theorisations about the genre, Beverly cautions against tying down the *testimonio* within strict generic boundaries. He says :

Since *testimonio* is by nature of demotic and dynamic form, not subject to critical legislation by a normative literary establishment, any attempt to specify a generic definition for it, as I do here, should be considered at best provisional, at worst, repressive. (1993 : 70-71).

The relationship between the mediator/compiler/transcriber and the subject is another issue that cannot be easily resolved. Without any doubt, any collaborative effort, in this case the mediator of the *testimonio* and the subject reflects the identity of both. While it is true that the mediator's perceptions determine the shape the *testimonio* takes, it is also quite clear that there is a reverse manipulation at work, as Beverly (1993 : 80) and Linda Craft (1997 : 5-6) have suggested, as the producer of the *testimonio* also has an agenda, at least that of offering an alternate version of history that includes points of views that have gone unrepresented. In the case of Rigoberta Menchú's first *testimonio*, differences that arose between her and Elizabeth Burgos have only complicated these issues of representation. Without going into the details of the possible differences between the transcriber and the transcribed, an attempt will be made in this paper to examine this issue with examples from both the *testimonios*.

Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala) was published in 1983. From Elizabeth Burgos' account, we are told that she met Rigoberta in Paris and she was drawn into writing the *testimonio* on the suggestion of a Canadian woman friend (1984 : xiv), though in the second book Menchú confesses that she was persuaded by Arturo Taracena to dictate her story to somebody well-known in academic circles so that the book could gain wider circulation. The main intention behind writing the *testimonio* was to draw attention of human rights groups and other international bodies to the genocide that was taking place in Guatemala, unknown or uncared for by the rest of the world. The relationship of complicity and trust that is presumed to be the mainstay of testimonial narratives therefore is absent at the beginning and it is only through the process of the recording and telling of the story that the two women develop a close relationship. It was Rigoberta who had approached Elizabeth Burgos for helping her write the *testimonio*. Elizabeth Burgos too reveals in the Introduction that she was at first reluctant because she had never met Rigoberta and she "realised that such projects depend to a large extent on the quality of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee." (1984 : xiv) However, in her second book Rigoberta Menchú describer[?] the recording of her testimony in the following manner :

The recording of my testimony lasted 12 days. Then, there was a solidarity group in Paris that helped in transcribing it. There I met Juan Mendoza, a close friend until this day. Dr. Taracena also participated a lot in ordering the book, along with Elizabeth Burgos. In the end, together they made the selection of chapters. What I mean is that Arturo Taracena played a significant role in the book ... Then the text reached me. I spent a couple of months trying to understand it. It is very different how one feels talking than when it appears in print. I realise that I was very timid then. Although I am still timid, I am not as innocent or ingenuous as I was then. I simply did not understand the commercial rules when I wrote those memoirs. (1998: 254)

This, among other omissions and mistakes, gives the impetus and compels her to write the second book -- to make amends and to give space to some important people like her mother who had been left out in the first one. She insists that she did not do justice to her mother in *I Rigoberta*, as she does not speak much of her. Moreover, she feels that adequate attention is not paid to the process of her politicisation in the earlier *testimonio* because her activities in the Committee of Peasant Union (CUC) are not mentioned in any great detail. This is important for her because it is this process of politicisation that changes her vision. However, she also realises that the book was a "memory of the victims" but many names had to be removed because she feared for the lives of the people who were struggling in the midst of the worst kind of repression. The book represents the collective memory of the people who lived that reality but it also leaves a lot unsaid. She confesses that Arturo Taracena was aware of the deficiencies :

If I would have paid attention to him and if I would have known, as I do now, that advisers also have a role and an opinion that must be taken into account, perhaps the book would have been better. We would have done it differently. History cannot be changed. What can be changed is the schematising of experiences. What one can do is not to commit the same mistakes... (1998 :256)

Fourteen years set apart the two books and this is also an important factor in our understanding and evaluation of these texts. The granddaughter of the Mayas, Rigoberta Menchú has relentlessly campaigned for the rights of the indigenous people of her country and

this struggle and her journey through the corridors of power have made her a sharper person. Therefore it is no surprise that, as Gugelberger points out, the second book

is much more reflective, mediated and focused on certain key topics. Our speaker is obviously more informed and experienced, and she has travelled to and through numerous countries and worked extensively and intensively for the U.N. It may not be easy to visualise the author of the famous *testimonio* armed with a computer, a secretary, and a car and driver but still wearing the characteristic huipil. (1999 : 63)

The most important difference that readers would notice immediately is that the book is written by Rigoberta Menchú — she is the author of the book — but it is not an individual production. The book is a result of a collaborative effort, in which interestingly there is no single compiler or transcriber or mediator but multiple ones. Most significant is the collaboration of Dante Liano, a Guatemalan writer and poet, who helped her “reconcile the manner of living, thinking, understanding and expression a large part of my life in Quiché so that it could be perceived, lived, understood and respected in Spanish, and in all the other languages of the world” (1998 : 26). The other collaborator is Gianni Mina, an Italian writer, who helped Rigoberta give shape to her book and to organise it in chapters. He describes the book thus in his prologue :

This is the testimonial book of an indigenous Maya woman of the Quiché region of Guatemala who, having received the Nobel Peace Prize, reflects on the values of her civilization and ours. This is an act of compensation for Rigoberta Menchú, who in the early 1980s rent the veil of hypocrisy of the West, which talked about human rights while refusing — out of sheer opportunism — to recognise them as the military dictatorship of Guatemala inflicted genocide on its people. (1998 : 15)

The *testimonio* was recorded in the presence of yet another collaborator, don Mario Matute, a blind Guatemalan writer. The book is prefaced by Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, who insists that Rigoberta does not speak about the Mayas but from within them. There are two introductions; one by Esteban Beltrán, Director of the Spanish Section of Amnesty International, who talks about the 36 year long civil war and the trail of destruction, disappearances, massacres that it left as scars on Guatemalan society. The other is by Humberto Ak'abal, a

poet who writes in Quiche, who describes the book as not only a testimony of Rigoberta Menchú's life experiences and as a journey through "our recent past", but also as a point of departure for reflection and analysis for future action. Without departing from the flavour of oral tradition, that is the experience of listening rather than reading, the book, according to Humberto Ak'abal, is able to recreate the magical experience of sitting around the fire at the end of the day, with the hearth burning and the family gathered to sit listening to the grandparents... Finally, there is a prologue by the co-author Dante Liano, and Menchú's acknowledgements, where she also insists that the book is a result of a collaborative project.

It is necessary to describe this formal structural aspect of the book because it highlights one of the most important aspects of testimonial writing, that of it being a collaborative effort and a voice of the collective, rather than that of an individual who wishes to emphasise her role in social struggles. It is a product of Menchú's engagement with the struggles of her people through her work from exile and her relentless campaign for justice for the victims of the military excesses after winning the Nobel Prize. It is also the result of a translation of her oral narrative in Quiche, with the help of the lettered intellectuals, to the written word, first in Spanish and then to other languages.

The journey in the *testimonio* through the "recent past" begins with her return to Guatemala in 1994 after the Nobel Peace Prize, contrasting this with an earlier visit when she and three other comrades were received at the airport by more than 400 police personnel and taken into custody without any access to legal representation. Three charges were made against her : for causing peasant uprisings and disturbances which was dangerous for national security, despite the fact that she had been living in exile since 1980 and officially lived in Mexico. The second charge was that of writing and using Marxist-Leinist propaganda against national security and the third more serious charge was that of organising the training of guerrilla cadre in Nicaragua and Cuba. Menchú's detention is successful in galvanising the indignant people of Guatemala and she also acknowledges the support of the press. She thanks the authorities for making her so "famous" by according her such a high status as a specialist or commandant of guerrilla warfare. The struggles and the aspirations that she represented would never have been known so widely had it not been for the arrest.

Rigoberta Menchú's return to her village Laj Chimal is marked by mixed sentiments : Sadness over the deaths and destruction that have completely made the place unrecognisable since she left it; and happiness at all the memories of her childhood that deluge her mind on her return. The sense of belonging to a community heightens and she is more resolute in her decision to reconstruct Chimal, to bring justice and dignity to the people. Rigoberta Menchú is not only interested in fighting for a voice and space for her people in the mainstream but also in integrating them linguistically and socially into the mainstream. She says :

How to sow the seeds for an intercultural relationship between our people? How much time would we need for that? Our language is very rich, it contains the entire universe. Our minds and our language are referents of a hill, of a thing. Spanish is very rich, but, for us, it is very abstract. (1998 : 86)

Moving on to 1995, Menchú records the events leading to the Massacre at Xamán, where large numbers of women and children were massacred by the military, ostensibly for "brutally attacking the army". What really happened was of course a different story. The indigenous people were resisting the presence of the military in the village during the celebrations of one year of the return of the displaced to Xaman. The government in turn accused the villagers of supporting the guerrilla fighters and opened fire against them, killing and wounding innocent people. This was after the so-called return of "peace and democracy". Anguished and indignant at the brutal use of force, the people collectively decided to continue with the celebrations to register their protest and Rigoberta Menchú decided to cast herself alongside the people.

This was the moment to enter the labyrinths of justice and to push one's way through the labyrinths of impunity. I thought about it, I listened and discussed with others. I was more determined than ever. One had to do it for many reasons : for the victims' right to justice; because one could bring to book the people responsible for the massacre through a judicial process; because of the moral responsibility to fight impunity. (1998 : 106)

This was of course easier said than done. At the time of the writing of the book, a year and a half had passed since the massacre. The trial was not over but after a bitter and protracted struggle, the indigenous

people had managed to get their case tried in a civil court and not in a military court; an important achievement by all means.

Rigoberta Menchú, in the subsequent chapters of the book, records her experiences, from her journey into exile, her life in Mexico, her march through the corridors of international bodies that would ultimately help attract attention to and change the destiny of her people, and more importantly, her increasing political awareness of the need to incorporate the movement against oppression and for justice to the larger social movements crystallising in that region of Latin America. What is also important to note is that she is not interested any more in withholding the secrets of her community or in preserving the "pristine character" of the Mayan way of life but rather acknowledges the need to incorporate this way of life to the mainstream. There is no desire to nostalgically recreate a distant or lost Mayan past but to modernise the indigenous communities and locate them in the present. She assumes the role of a granddaughter of her community because "being a granddaughter means having grandparents, having a history, having a past, and at the same time, it represents having young blood, belonging to a new generation, gazing towards the future." (1998 : 130)

For Rigoberta Menchú, another important reason for writing the sequel to her *testimonio*, is to remember her mother and the double marginalisation of women. She laments the fact that she does not give sufficient space to her mother in *I Rigoberta*. Separation from her mother the first time is what makes her determined to return to her native village because it is such a painful experience. Though she was too young then to understand the role her mother played in organising the community, she says :

I tried talking about her many times, but I could not overcome my sadness. My mother was so courageous, so big and strong. My mourning for her can never end and the suffering is irreparable. Later, I started writing about her but I could never complete it (1998 : 128)

In the next part of the *testimonio*, Rigoberta Menchú takes up the issue of the difference between religion and faith, the place for science and technology in the Mayan cosmovision, and draws certain important conclusions for her people. She argues that religion is often the tool for politics and that religion had been an arm of conquest and

colonisation in Latin America. She is keen in her observation that religion often becomes a tool for diverting attention from economic problems and religion is also used to defend all kinds of impunity in the world. She says :

They say, "one who does not sin does not know God's forgiveness". Therefore, one can hate, oppress, kill and then ask for God's forgiveness. This is how the religious message has been given to the victims so that they can forget their victimisers. (1998 : 150)

As regards scientific knowledge, Menchú thinks that the problem arises when men use science for controlling and oppressing others. Strongly critical of so-called development programmes where scientists or technicians are sent to study, educate and teach the Indians, she rebukes those who mistakenly think that social inequities and lack of respect and dignity towards the Indian are questions of scientific or technological underdevelopment. For instance, she gives the example of how television can be used to transmit the millenarian stories that grandparents tell their grandchildren to the entire community. Television, according to her, can also be used to sensitise people to Indian traditions without fear of manipulation or misrepresentation.

The last three chapters in her testimony return to the issues of the violence faced by her family, the repression and brutalities that she witnessed and finally her exile and then her return to Guatemala. She describes her participation in international campaigns for Human Rights and the indefatigable energies that she galvanised in order to bring the guilty to task but also laments the fact that everybody knows who the killers are except the judges. She briefly mentions the hate-campaign unleashed against her "For some she continues to be the abusive Indian, the subversive, an ignorant person from a modest background". (1998 : 177) Finally, she does not lose hope, — never in the three hundred odd pages of her testimony does she reflect any pessimism — that a new generation would be born that would not subscribe to this mentality and that indigenous men and women would be proudly able to take their place in history alongside the others.

My reading of *Rigoberta : Granddaughter of the Mayas* confirms the fact that it is a *testimonio*, and not her memoirs but a collaborative effort, written in the context of peoples' movements and struggles for

equality and justice. As the different issues addressed in the *testimonio* show, it has to be recognised as a document that constitutes a constant movement through her individual memory, as a witness to some eventful moments, towards a collective memory of a time, and arises out of the political desire to give space to the voice of her community that has been oppressed and silenced for centuries. Georg Gugelberger, in his reflections on Rigoberta Menchú's second book, refuses it the status of a *testimonio* as according to him the *testimonio* "is a one-time affair, a coup in the world of letters" and since *I Rigoberta* achieved that coup when it was published in 1983, the second book must be regarded as Menchú's memoirs. If the two structural aspects that distinguish *testimonios* from other first person narratives like autobiographies, life stories, memoirs, among others, are the presence of mediators and the response to a situation of marginalisation or exploitation, then there is no reason to deny this place to Rigoberta Menchú's second book. In fact, Menchú's second book exemplifies that discursive space that Beverly (1991) refers to where it becomes possible to negotiate an alliance between the radicalised intelligentsia and the subaltern. Rigoberta Menchú's second *testimonio* also brings into play what has been called "counter memory", which arises from the need to create a space for the linguistically and politically marginalised voices through language and literature and manifests itself as a project that consciously subverts official histories and presents alternative versions of the same. Furthermore, Menchú is engaged in an attempt "to expose and resolve contradictions and effect social, political and economic transformation." (Craft, 1997 : 15) "There is a resistance to protecting the idea of an absolute, original, unedited, untouched version of events and happenings, which would be of course a utopian dream, but which unfortunately does not exist. At the same time this *testimonio* seeks to be a projection of history "as it should have been" and "as it could be possible in the future"; and therefore Rigoberta Menchú's project is no longer to keep secrets but to reveal so that the struggle against forgetting is intensified.

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**MIGUEL BARNET'S BIOGRAPHY OF
A RUNAWAY SLAVE REVISITING *TESTIMONIO* FROM
A DALIT-CALIBAN VANTAGE POINT**

I no longer believe in genres, as the people have never believed in them. The people sang ballads, and rhymed couplets, used theatrical and narrated forms, and subordinated all of that to the effectiveness of the message, and the people never got stuck on one thing. I think our peoples still have much to tell in their own tongue, not in the one invented for them to undermine them.

Miguel Barnet, 'Afterword', *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

Satyam, shivam, sundaram -- these are fabrications used to divide and exploit ordinary people. In fact, the aesthetic concept of 'satyam, shivam, sundaram' is the selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society. It is necessary to replace this conception of aesthetics with one that is material and social.

Sharankumar Lambale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*

In his seminal essay "Caliban : Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America" (1971), the well known Cuban poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar traced the literary origins of Caliban beginning from Columbus's logs where the *carib* Indian becomes the *cannibal*, and then through Montaigne and Shakespeare in whose *The Tempest* the figure of the rude savage conveys the characteristic vision of the anthropological Other as a monstrous slave. In *The Tempest*, the deformed Caliban -- enslaved, robbed of his island, and trained to speak by Prospero -- rebukes Prospero thus : "You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse." The essay forms part of a vast

array of Latin American and Caribbean re-workings of Shakespearean drama in the context of post independence debates in Latin America as to what would be the model for the Latin American intellectual of the new republics. If in his turn of the century essay *Ariel*, José Enrique Rodó's symbol for "Our America" is Shakespeare's "spirit of the air". Retamar, post-1959 Cuban intellectual historicizes the Ariel-Caliban choice and posits the deformed slave as a powerful symbol to refer to Latin American and Caribbean subaltern identity. The genre of *testimonio* as it developed in Latin America in the specific historical context of the 1960s and 70s as an expression of cultural resistance and in overt opposition to the cosmopolitan Latin American "boom" novel, is the voice of the Latin American subaltern, the voice of Caliban. In India too, in the wake of a wave of political self-assertion, Dalit literature emerged around the 1960s and 70s as a corpus of writing in which the Dalit subaltern, the untouchable Other of the upper caste Hindu society, for the first time appeared as the speaking subject in a literary field dominated by *Savarna* writers. The preferred genre of Dalit expression has been the autobiography given the importance attached to the authenticity of the Dalit experience. Dalit autobiographies, which have been compared to Black autobiographies (Limble, 82-102), are now also being read in the critical framework of the Latin American *testimonio* not only in terms of their narrative strategies and content, but also, and mainly, in terms of how they are located institutionally in the critical academic and literary discourse in general. The Ariel-Caliban/ *Savarna*-Dalit polarities problematise the colonizer/colonized binary dominating much of postcolonial literary studies. This paper revisits *testimonio* as a genre from what we term a Dalit-Caliban vantage point. We shall attempt a general analysis of the genre employing a critical apparatus that derives from Cuban cultural critics and Dalit literary criticism and then move on to a reading of Cuban ethnologist Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) [Biography of a Runaway Slave, 1994] which is considered the founding text of the genre of Latin American *testimonio* as well as of the Cuban cultural project as it evolved after the revolutionary upheavals of 1959. Our argument is that the narrative relation between the 106-year-old ex-slave Esteban Montejo who recounts his story and the young ethnologist Miguel Barnet who transcribes it enabling its publication, demands not only a different critical approach

to literary works but also a redefinition of who is an intellectual. Dalit consciousness has been compared with that of a slave's and several Dalit writers in India have drawn inspiration from Black African American literature. ("Dalit writers' caste and Black writers' colour shape their distinct experience" says Limbale, 93). Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* is a part as much of Black literature as it is of the Latin American *testimonio*. Reading it in the light of Dalit life narratives gives useful insights regarding the form and purpose of the genre, its diversity and richness and most importantly, a vantage point from where to hear the suppressed voices in postcolonial literatures, Latin American and Indian, in this context.

Testimonial Narratives in Cuba and India

Testimonio is a potent narrative form which privileges the voice of subaltern subjects and posits them as agents capable of creating knowledge out of subaltern experience and out of their 'silent memory' (Viramama 311). *Testimonio* contains what Edward Said has referred to as "repressed or resistant history" (94). This "repressed history" and "silent memory" unveil themselves at moments when hegemonic structures are challenged. As Barbara Harlowe says :

Just as institutions of power (whether those developed within a society or political order or those inspired by external hegemonic practices and domination) are subverted by the demand on the part of the dispossessed groups for an access to history, power, and resources, so too are the narrative paradigms and their textual authority transformed by the historical and literary articulation of those demands. (122)

It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the genre of *testimonio* has been associated in Latin America with the revolutionary movements that swept across the continent in the 1960s. Commenting on the impetus given by the Cuban revolution to *testimonio* as a written means to begin exploring the contours of a collective identity and its development as a concrete historical genre, Miguel Barnet has said: "The lessons of Latin American history in the 60s give a devastating impulse to works of testimony. I believe the Cuban Revolution, with its powerful organic influence, provided all the literature of this type that developed in the

Americas with a rejuvenating nutrient.” (Biography 203). Though the “Boom” novel too is associated with the Cuban revolution’s call for a revolutionary artistic vanguard, the *testimonio* is seen as a “rebuque to the Boom’s fetish of vanguardism and its disdain for the popular” (Colás 391).

Notwithstanding the wide variety of texts it presents, there is a certain consensus amongst critics with regard to the formal features of *testimonio*. One of the main features of the genre is the erasure of the function and textual presence of the “author” because the author has been replaced in *testimonio* by the function of a “compiler” or “scribe.” Generally the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or not a professional writer which is why the oral account is transcribed by the scribe who is an intellectual or a journalist or writer. John Beverly, describes the *testimonio* using the Russian formalist term *skaz*, i.e., a literary simulacrum of oral narrative (1996 : 26-7) and emphasizes the need to distinguish *testimonio* from the central form of non-fictional first person narrative that is autobiography and cognate forms of personal narratives such as memoirs, diaries, confessions, reminiscences and the like (1996 : 35). He suggests that unlike the autobiographical form that is built on the notion of a coherent, self-evident, self-conscious, commanding subject, “*testimonio* represents an affirmation of individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be *testimonio* and becomes autobiography ... a sort of documentary bildungsroman” (35-36). Theorising on the aesthetics of this new genre, Miguel Barnet had also emphasized the main formal feature of the *testimonio* as the erasure, firstly, of the individual “author” and its replacement by the making of a “we” that encompasses the protagonist, the collective, the interlocutor, and also the reader and secondly, the erasure of the gap between the living, spoken language of the collective and the written representation of that language (1983 : 295-6). Dalit autobiographies and other life narratives of Dalit assertion arising out of lived experiences of social marginalisation, violence and poverty in India share several features of the *testimonio*. MSS Pandian was, perhaps, the first to bring this structural similarity of form and politics of Dalit autobiography and the Latin American *testimonio* into the critical discourse when in his brief

piece on Bama's *Karukku* entitled "On a Dalit woman's *testimonio*", he argued that Bama's text was indeed not an autobiography nor a novel but a case of wilfully violating genre boundaries whereby the narrative depletes the autobiographical "I", an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community (1998 : 54). In her recent work, *writing caste/writing gender: narrating dalit women's testimonios*, Sharmila Rege discusses the generic similarities between *testimonios* and life narratives of Dalit women and says that "dalit life narratives are in fact *testimonios* which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the "official forgetting" of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance" (13). Rege underlines the way in which Dalit women's *testimonios* in India agitated their way into the public sphere in the 1980s and are engaging us in processes of "rememory" or restructuring of histories of institutions and practices in a nation actively invested in forgetting them (75).

It is this will to rememorise or reconstruct history that informs the rich cultural production of *testimonios* in Latin America since the mid and late 1960s. The vindication of *testimonio* as a genre in its own right came in 1970 when the prestigious Casa de las Américas of Cuba included an award for this generic category in its annual awards. This inclusion was in response to a particular reality of cultural expression. Casa de las Américas, which was founded in 1959 after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, had been receiving a kind of literary work that could not be included in the genres for which the prizes were traditionally given because they were neither novels, nor poems, nor essay nor short story. In other words, these works could not be pigeonholed in any traditional genre. The concrete nature of the genre required a new category and thus since 1969 Casa began this award which in its first year went to the *testimonio* *Guerilla tupamara* [The Tupamar Guerrilla] by the Uruguayan María Esther Gilio. In its recent edition in January 2007, the award has once again gone to a Uruguayan writer, Edda Fabbri for a *testimonio* entitled *Oblivion*, which is a chronicle of a woman political prisoner jailed during the years of dictatorship in Uruguay. Edda Fabbri was herself a member of the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement in the 1970s and was in jail from 1972 to 1985. Fabbri's narrative won the award from among the 26 entries in the category for

the year. The diversity of *testimonios* that have been published and reviewed and analysed over these 40-odd years shows that the genre refuses to be domesticated and enjoys a creative vitality and variety even today. It emerges as and from a large corpus of popular memory of a continent ravaged by military dictatorships, violence and the resistance to it by guerrilla wars and new social movements.

Testimonio became the centre of hot debate by the end of the 1980s and continues to be a charged word in the US academia. Unlike the virulent attacks on Dalit writing on grounds of literary merit, its legitimacy as a field of studies is not questioned directly, but that was what was lurking behind much of the discussion around it, a lot of which is linked to its Cuban affiliation viewed in the US academia predominantly in the Cold War perspective. George Yúdice, for example, claimed that testimonial writing coincided with one of the fundamental tenets of post modernity in that it rejects "master narratives" of universal emancipation and seeks emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstances (43-44). Yúdice rejects the Cuban *testimonios* which for him are "an attempt on the part of the state to consolidate a national subject by means of the testimonial process." (45) Thus the volume of testimonies edited by leading Cuban writers like Mirta Aguirre, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Onelio Jorge Cardoso and others entitled *Dice la Paloma* is rubbished as state-sponsored voices that "constrain expression", in contrast to *testimonios* like that of Rigoberta Menchú that have emerged from "consciousness raising experiences" elsewhere in Latin America and undermine what he calls "paternalistic master narratives" (46). On the Casa awards, Yúdice has the following to say :

It is significant, as regards global hegemonic struggles, that the prize was instituted after the break with liberal Latin American intellectuals over the "hardening" of the Soviet line of the Cuban government. (54)

While Yúdice sees the Cuban affiliation of the *testimonio* as a strategy on part of the Cuban state institutions to create a "populist metadiscourse," David Stoll in his attack on Rigoberta Menchú insinuates that Menchú was complicitous with the guerrilla movements supported by Cuba :

Cuban promotion of Rigoberta and Elisabeth's book suggested that it might be speaking for the guerrillas more than the peasants. The

internecine disputes dividing Rigoberta's neighbors dropped out of story, making armed struggle sound like an inevitable reaction to oppression, at a time when Mayans were desperate to escape violence. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* became a way to mobilize foreign support for a wounded, retreating insurgency. (xiii, quote by Arias 83)

Stoll thus rhetorically associates Menchú with Cuba and the controversy created by his book among the intellectual elite in the US suggests that the Central American debate is more about US politics and paranoia than about a Mayan truth (Arias 83).

For those in the US academia who stood in favour of opening the canon, *testimonio* literally became the "desire called Third World literature;" this desire then waned resulting in "the replacement of the Third World metaphor by the metaphor of postcoloniality" (Gugelberger, 1). The western academic soon found other "objects of desire", Indian Writing in English, perhaps, being one of them. But the demise of this desire does not mean that the genre of *testimonio* ceases to exist. As Denegri points out, the argument that *testimonio*, which is associated with the revolutionary movements of the 70s in Latin America, has lost its relevance in the present world of globalisation and is yet another progressive utopia thwarted by the political and economic neo-liberal reforms of the turn of the century, could be more revealing about a possible crisis of Latin American Studies in the US academia than about the actual health of the genre which is still thriving despite and perhaps because of the fact that it never made that move into the literary canon (Denegri 238).

Dalit literature in general, and Dalit autobiography in particular, has been the site of intense polemics in India too on literary, aesthetic and social considerations. These debates have not yet found resonance in the theorizing about Indian literature in the academia within and abroad as most of the texts and the debates that have raged around them are largely in the various regional languages of India, many times in local publications outside the mainstream publication industry while the discussions on Indian literature, even from postcolonial and subaltern perspectives, have been in English (Mukherjee, vii). Latin American *testimonio*, being available in Spanish, a metropolitan language, found far more circulation in the academic circles and the discussions around

it quickly found their way into the critical discourse. In that sense, the translator of Dalit autobiography plays a similar role to that of the scribe or the compiler of the Latin American *testimonio* in that s/he makes available the text to the (English knowing) lettered public. The recent spate of translations of Dalit testimonial narratives into English from various regional languages of India and their publication through prestigious mainstream publishers is already impacting the way Indian literatures are being studied and critically evaluated¹ much in the same way as the *testimonio* impacted the literary canon making of Latin American literature.

Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, originally published in 1966 (most recently translated in 1994), is the first milestone, as we have mentioned above, in the emergence of the Latin American *testimonio* as a genre and formed as integral part of the Cuban revolution's cultural project. Based on interviews with Esteban Montejo, a 105-year old ex-slave, this documentary novel is considered the most enduring work of the new tradition. Some critics (Sklódowska, 92) consider Fidel Castro to have acted as an inspirational force to *testimonio* compilers like Barnet when in his "Words to the intellectuals" in 1961 he asked the writers and intellectuals to be participants in the revolution. At the end of this speech he recalled his encounter with an old woman exslave in whom he saw a repository of knowledge that had to be tapped for the revolution to be able to make the cultural transformation :

We had the experience recently of coming across an old lady 106 years old who had just learned how to read and write, and we proposed that she should write a book. She had been a slave, and we wanted to know how a slave viewed the world when she was a slave, what her first impressions of life, of her masters, and of her companions were. I believe that this old woman could write something more interesting about her age than any of us could. It is possible that she will become completely literate in a year and will also write a book at age 106. This is the stuff of revolutions! Who could write better than she about what the slave saw, and who could write better about the present than you? (273)

The two trends that developed in the tradition of the documentary novel or *testimonio* in Cuba are already intuited in this quote : one trend would be in the form of documenting the present, the "literatura de campaña."

or battlefield literature, a phrase coined by the Cuban essayist and critic Ambrosio Fornet (Rivero, 69-79). This would include, for example, Che's *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* [Episodes of a Revolutionary War], Raúl González Cascorro's *Aquí se habla de combatientes y de bandidos* [Here we speak of combatants and bandits], which won the 1975 Casa de las Américas award for *testimonio*, Víctor Cásaus' *Girón en la memoria* [Giron in my memory], and *Pablo: con el filo de la hoja* [Pablo : with the edge of a blade] (1983), among others. This kind of testimonial narrative also appeared in Central America and other regions of Latin America and as Kavita Panjabi points out, *Sandino's Daughters* and *Let me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of Bolivian Mines* inspired Indian testimonial narratives like *We were making history: Women and the Telengana Uprising*. This hybrid of reportage and imaginative narration is the hallmark of leading Latin American writers even today.

The other trend would be a sort of cultural history dealing with the folk tradition and everyday life of a marginal witness. It is an attempt to preserve an oral tradition and collective memory (cf. Echevarria). Miguel Barnet's *Canci6n de Rachel* [Rachel's Song] (1967), Renée Menéndez Copote's *Memorias de una cubanita que nació con el siglo* [Memories of a little Cuban woman born with the century] (1969), and more recently Romón C. Fajardo Estrada's *Rita Montaner : testimonio de una época del arte cubano* [Rita Montaner: Testimony of a Period of Cuban Art] (1997) and Pérez Sarduy's *Las criadas de la Habana* [The Maids of Havana] (2003) are representative works of this strand. The autobiography of Chindu Yellama, a Telugu Dalit folk artist, *Neenu Chindula Yellamanu* [I, Chindula Yellama] compiled by K. Muthyram, as examined by T. Srivani, falls into this category of *testimonios*.

Biography of a Runaway Slave in a way combines the two trends. On the one hand it delves into the world of Afro-Cuban traditions and on the other it reconstructs Cuba's colonial history of slavery, its abolition and the wars of independence to the founding of the Cuban Republic in 1902, all this through the voice of Esteban Montejo, a former runaway slave who lived through these moments. It stands as a corrective to ethnographic life-histories such as those of Oscar Lewis as it is clearly written against Lewis's representation of subaltern Latin

Americans as bearers of a "culture of poverty." (Gugelberger and Kearny, 12). In the after-word entitled, "The Alchemy of Memory," appended to the 1994 English translation of this *testimonio*, Barnet writes :

I aspire to be a sounding board for the collective memory of my country. For that purpose I resort to oral discourse, to myths and to the anthropomorphic Cuban fable...I don't aspire to make categorical definitions, nor do I offer solutions to social problems, which are the proper obligation of the politicians. The only desire I have is to reveal the human heart, the heart of the men that traditional historiography has marked with the sign of a proverbial fatalism by writing them off as "people without a history." I think I have indeed shown that the life of men of the so-called culture of poverty as defined by Oscar Lewis, doesn't always lack the will to exist, or lack a consciousness of history. And even when such a life is anchored in a sense of marginality, the flame of that life glows towards the future. (205-6).

Runaway Slave was called 'novela testimonial' or documentary novel by Miguel Barnet himself. It stands as the originator of the genre of *testimonio* but has also been considered as forming part of the slave narrative tradition. Thus it belongs to the diasporic Black literature — essentially to the Afro-Caribbean literary corpus — as also to Cuban literature which itself has a strong African element. Barnet was barely 19 years old when the revolution triumphed in Cuba. The first edition of *Runaway Slave* was published in 1966 by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore of the Cuban Academy of Sciences. In the "Introduction" to the Spanish edition, Barnet tells us that the project grew out of a newspaper article that appeared in 1963 about a nursing home honouring its residents over 100 years old including some ex-slaves. Barnet was then, as a young ethnologist, researching Afro-Cuban religions, so he followed up on the article and met Esteban Montejo who was then 103 years old (b. 1860). Aware of the lack of historical information on the subject of slavery, Barnet was guided by a concern to fill a void in the history of Cuba.² In other words, writing or rewriting history was an important component of Barnet's project in order to "contribute to the articulation of a collective memory." The result was a hybrid genre, the testimonial novel that was history, ethnology and reportage, all at the same time.

The Dalit-Caliban Vantage Point : A Counter-theory for a Counter-literature

The Latin American *testimonio* and Dalit autobiography share the common feature of being 'post-literature' (Beverly, 1995) in that they constitute a move beyond the literary. The collective voice, the collaborative mode of production, their textual politics, their identitarian and social revolutionary agenda, demand a counter literary theory and a counter reader. In India, in the face of intense hostility from established literary circles, Dalit writers have also been theorizing on their works and insisting that Dalit literature needs to develop a separate aesthetics. Arun Prabha Mukherjee notes in the "Introduction" to her translation of OP Valmiki's *Joothan* :

A literary critic reared in an educational system that taught a canon of literature focused solely on the experience of privileged sections of society, whether of India or of the West, must tread cautiously in this new territory, utilizing the benchmarks provided by Dalit literary theory and being continuously on guard against those kinds of formalist analyses that privilege form over content. (xxx1)

Similarly, Sharan Kumar Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, has continually stressed the need for a separate Dalit aesthetic pointing out that Dalit literature is a new literary stream of the post-Independence period and differs in its form and purpose from Savarna Marathi literature and therefore cannot be appraised using traditional aesthetics. There is, in fact, an entire new corpus of literature emerging from subjects who 'talk differently' (Guru : 2548-50) which now constitutes a challenge to mainstream literary critics.

In one of the essays written soon after the revolution, Fernández Retamar too pointed to the incongruity of approaching Latin American literature with intellectual tools derived from other literatures and argued that

This literature...is...still begging to be studied from a decolonized vantage point: usually it is presented as a mere projection of metropolitan culture — as something very different from what it actually is — often through an arbitrary system of values that places its formal experiments at the forefront and obscures its true functions with varying ideological (and frequently diversionary) motives and consequences. (74)

Roberto Fernández Retamar insists that "we must avoid the aprioristic attempt to draw the lines of demarcation of our literature" (85). He argues that the main line of Latin American literature, Cuban literature in particular, is a mulatto, a hybrid whereas the purist, the strictly and narrowly "literary" one is marginal. It is from such a theoretical vantage point that one can begin to understand the pre-eminence in Latin American literature of genres considered to be "ancillary": Columbus's diary, Cortes's letter to the Catholic kings, the vision of the vanquished taken from their oral testimonies by missionaries, Sor Juana's *Respuesta* [Reply] which is considered the first feminist document of Latin America, Bolívar's "Letter from Jamaica", Martí's essays, Mariátegui's articles, Che's campaign diaries, many such examples can be added to the numerous present day *testimonios*. Thus a revisioning of the literary canon would reveal that the margin has been straining to be the very centre in Latin American literature. The *testimonio* too does not erupt at the margin and suddenly occupy the centre as the title of Beverly's essay — "The Margin at the Centre" — would lead us to believe. The institution of *testimonio* in the 1970s is also thanks to be decolonized vantage point provided by the cultural politics of the Cuban revolution and other Latin American revolutionary projects for national liberation.

Following Retamar's focus on functional instrumentality as the dominant mode of Latin American literature where literary is 'mulattoed' by other functions, there was a general politicization of critical activity. For example, in 1978, in *El cambio en la nación de literatura* [Changing notions of literature], Carlos Rincón, reiterated the transgressive role of the testimonial genre underlining its importance as a textual space that invites a revisioning of the Latin American tradition and at the same time highlighted the need for a paradigm change in literary analysis that would call for abandoning an essentialist conception of literature given by the bourgeois ideology of modernity, so as to incorporate the analysis of social processes as part of the critical enterprise. This did not entail a return to the sociology of literature approach but of relocating literary discourse in the general spectrum of social and cultural discourses without privileging either in a hierarchical way.² In other words, the emphasis was on taking literature out of the sphere of representation and symbolic mediation and reintroducing it in the sphere of social practices. The opinions of Miguel Barnet in his early works that tried

to elaborate a poetics of the genre, such as "La novela-testimonio: socio-literatura" [The Testimonial Novel: Socio-literature] where he attacked the new novel, form a part of this context and that of the production of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. In his 1996 prologue to the four volumes compiling articles of literary criticism published by the Biblioteca Ayacucho under the title *Lectura crítica de la literatura americana*, Saúl Sosnowski pointed out that if one had to establish the starting point of the changes that have occurred in the recent times in the area of criticism, it would be located in the 60s, when the Cuban revolution provoked a new direction in literary and cultural studies, which, among other effects, would lead to a profound revision of the canon.

Dalit testimonial narratives and Latin American *testimonio*, thus demand a going beyond the narrow confines of traditional understanding of the literary and at the same time they subvert the colonizer/colonized binary to discern the subaltern voices within postcolonial literatures that are either overlooked in official canons or subsumed into a critical discourse which is alien to their particularities.³

The speaking subject of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

Esteban Montejo's narrative compiled by Miguel Barnet is of singular importance as it was the very first account centered on the life of an ex-slave who had witnessed some of the most turbulent moments of Cuba's colonial history. Critics have analysed this text in relation to issues of the politics of memory, the text's relation to the genre of the novel and the narrative powers at work in a mediated testimony like this one. While the written text itself is undoubtedly the result of the collaborative effort between the young ethnographer and his autobiographical subject, the main element that animates it is the memory and voice of the centenarian ex-slave.

The narrative is divided into three sections. In the first section entitled "Slavery", Esteban Montejo offers a most poignant account of life under slavery. He was born in 1860 as a slave. With the end of sugar production on the Caribbean island of St. Domingue as a result of the Haitian revolution (1791-1804), Cuba became a major exporter of sugar from its plantations in the beginning of the nineteenth century. While slave trade was banned elsewhere in Latin America, European

merchants transported thousands of African slaves to Cuba from the 1780s to the 1860s. Montejo's parents must have been from among them. Montejo recalls that he never met his parents : "Blacks were sold like piglets, they sold me right off" (19). Very young still, he made an attempt to escape from the plantation of Flor de Sagua but was caught. Montejo recalls :

I rebelled, by God, and I ran away. Who wanted to work! But they caught me like a little lamb, and they put some shackles on me that I can still feel if I really think about it. They tied them on me tight and put me to work and all that. You talk about this kind of a thing now and folks don't believe you. But I experienced it, and now I've got to talk about it. (20)

Slave living conditions were particularly harsh in Cuba. The slaves worked long hours in the blazing tropical sun, in the sugar mills or cutting the cane, and at night slept in prison-like barracoons. However, Montejo's account also includes the small pleasures which the slaves afforded in the midst of all their hardship. He gives a delightful account of the games they played, their music, their natural herbs and potions for healing. He recalls how Catholicism mainly took hold amongst house-slaves as the priests were too afraid to enter the dirty barracoons where the field slaves lived. In a chapter entitled "Life in the woods", Montejo describes his life in the wilderness as a maroon, living all alone for several years after he made another bid to escape by throwing a rock that hit the head of the overseer and managed to escape. He says : "I felt good being a cimarrón. Because I was my own boss, and defended myself on my own" (52). And so he lived in hiding till Abolition came.

The second section of the narrative is "The Abolition of Slavery." Montejo returned to the sugar-mills to work and laboured as a free worker. His cynicism about race relations and treatment of the workers is evident from the outset :

There were masters, or rather owners, who believed that blacks were made for locking up and whipping. So they treated them the same as before. To my mind many blacks didn't realize things had changed because they kept on saying : "Your blessing, Master." (62)

Montejo criticized the lack of education provided for black and mulatto children, and the fact that competent blacks were barred from entering

the professions. Reserving some of his most scathing criticism for the Catholic hierarchy, Montejo claimed that "with women they [priests] were devils. They converted the sacristy into a whorehouse... The priests put women in caves, in holes in the ground where they had executioners ready to kill them" (80). In a wide-ranging discussion, Montejo provides a wealth of information about social life in late-nineteenth-century Cuba. After Abolition, the yearnings for independence began to grow stronger, leading to the 1895-1898 war. Montejo, the ex-slave, now sugar mill worker, was swept in it and enlisted immediately when it broke out. He recalls his own understanding of why the war was necessary: "It wasn't fair that so many jobs and so many privileges happened to fall in the hands of the Spaniards alone" (155). Thus it was not purely nationalist resentment that drove his participation. There was also the belief that colonialism was responsible for racial discrimination:

You never saw a black lawyer because they said that blacks were only good for the forest. You never saw any black teacher. It was all for the white Spaniards. Even the white criollos were pushed aside. I seen that myself. A night watchman, whose only job was to walk around, call out the hour, and put out a candle, had to be a Spaniard. And everything was like that. There was no freedom. That's why the war was necessary.. (155-6)

In the third section entitled "The War of Independence," Montejo comments upon his experiences during the fighting against Spain, which lasted from 1895 to 1898. Cuban guerrilla tactics and the use of the machete to cut off the heads of their enemy instilled terror among young Spanish troops. Cuban soldiers became known as *Mambises*, meaning the child of a monkey crossed with a buzzard. The Mambises fought heroically throughout the war, and Montejo attributes the victory over Spain to their actions. But he bitterly observes that after the war was over, the white Cubans who supported the Spanish side ended up with more opportunities than blacks who were on the independence side. United States troops landed in Cuba in 1898 in the final weeks of the war. During the occupation that followed, American troops brutalized the Cuban populace. Montejo blames the US intervention for institutionalising segregation and promoting racial discrimination:

Not even one percent of the police force were blacks because the Americans claimed that when a black gets power, when he's educated, it hurts the white race. So then they separated the blacks completely. White Cubans kept quiet, they didn't do a thing, and that's how it was until nowadays. (195)

And Montejo decides :

To tell the truth, I prefer the Spaniard to the American, but the Spaniard in his own country. Everyone in his own country. Today I don't like the American, even on his own territory. (196)

The key element in all the discussions on *Runaway Slave*, as in the case of other *testimonios*, has been the narrative relationship between Esteban Montejo, the illiterate slave narrator and Miguel Barnet, the lettered editor-compiler. Whose voice is it finally? Who controls the discourse? Who shapes memory?

William Luis, for example, says that the Cuban revolution conditioned Montejo's recollection and, on the other hand, as the motivator, transcriber and editor, Barnet is the agent of memory. The questions he framed, claims Luis, must have shaped the ex-slave's recollections and thus the text, motivated by his own interests (480). Luis then argues that as a creator of memory, Barnet intervenes most noticeably as he reconstructs Montejo's language and thus written memory is not a spontaneous recollection but a careful recreation of the past. Montejo, in fact, never did make a claim to 'truth'. At several instances in his narrative, he highlights the fact that what he is saying is what his memory is telling him (21). At one place towards the end of the narrative, for example, he says :

Back then I knew more things, more of the dirty tricks which history has covered up. I discussed them only with my friends. Now things have gotten all mixed up in my head. In spite of that, I can remember the most important things. (196)

So going beyond questions of authenticity and veracity of the text, and accepting that texts like *Runaway Slave* do perform the function of rewriting Cuban history, we still have a question to deal with. Who is the agent creating knowledge?

While Luis looks at this question from the criteria of power and hierarchy and denies any agency to Montejo, Roberto González Echevarría, in an important essay on *Biografía* and the novel of the Cuban revolution has commented extensively on the Montejo/Barnet narrative relationship arguing that the figures of Montejo and Barnet re-enact the original novelistic dialogue between Dante and Virgil, Celestina and Calixto, Lazarillo and Vuestra Merced, between Cervantes and his friend in the 1605 prologue, between Don Quijote and Sancho.

The question of authorship is an important one, not so much from the point of view of patenting and intellectual property rights perspective that regulates knowledge production today, but from the point of view of defining who an intellectual is. In the early days of testimonial writing, the agent who 'wrote' the narrative, the one who transformed the oral to the written word, was considered the author though in later *testimonios*, Rigoberta Menchú's being a case in point, the authorship of Rigoberta too was asserted and this became a hot point of discussion. The Dalit writer of the autobiography does not have to jostle with an Other for the "authority" of the text - the denial of his/her intellectuality is argued on other grounds such as literacy and aesthetic pleasure -- but to enter into the huge machinery of consumption and critical commentary, this text has to be rendered into the language of the metropolis, into English, and the narrative dialogue of a middle class compiler-subaltern narrator unfolds in the case of the Dalit writer as the dialogue between the English knowing and almost always upper caste translator and the almost always first generation neo-literate Dalit writer. If the intended reader of the Dalit autobiography is the Dalit community itself, the text would have to go back to them in an oral form as Bama did, reading out *Karakku* to her illiterate Dalit folk. If it is the limited middle class-upper caste reader of the regional language it is 'written in, the text would still not be totally intelligible to them as the Dalit dialect is strikingly different from the upper caste variety and equally alien are the numerous cultural and social references from the Dalit world, so apart from that of the upper castes'. The role and function of the translator of Dalit writing is quite like that of the *testimonio* compiler. Lakshmi Holmstrom has pointed to the

demands made on the translator by Bama's use of language in *Karruku* and *Saugati*. Only a translator reader committed to taking on a (un)learning process by intimately familiarising herself with Bama's world could have made discernible the multiple voices present in the text. There are, of course, those Dalit voices, outside the fold of literacy, that have been made audible by a compiler/scribe in the style of the Latin American *testimonio*, as is the case of several Dalit women in Rege's anthology.

I would suggest that Barnet-Montejo and translator-Dalit writer actually re-enact the roles of Ariel and Caliban. Ariel, as interpreted by Retamar, is the intellectual from the same island as Caliban. He can choose between serving Prospero or allying himself with Caliban in his struggle for true freedom. Though Caliban was represented as a deformed rude savage, by beginning to think and feel like him, by assuming the identity of Caliban, and not Ariel as the symbol of Latin American identity, Retamar is also pointing out that the battle of culture is a political battle, it is one of signification :

This is the dialectic of Caliban. To offend us they call as *mamby*, they call us *black*, but we reclaim as a mark of glory the honour of considering ourselves descendents of *mamby*, descendents of the rebel, runaway, *independista* black-never the descendents of the slave holder. (16, *Caliban*)

Replace the *mamby* with the *bhangi*, *chamar*, *chuhra*, *mahar* whose stories of discrimination, self-assertion and rebellion the Dalit autobiographies tell and a similar dialectic unfolds in the context of the Dalit writer. For a writer like Barnet, the testimony of Esteban Montejo gave him the possibility that he seek from Caliban, the organic intellectual, "the honour of a place in his rebellious and glorious ranks." Instead of an elitist rejection of Caliban for an idealised, Europeanised Ariel, for Retamar and Barnet, Caliban is truly Cuba; black and mulatto, no longer the provenance of a criollo elite. Reading *Biography of a Runaway Slave* in the context of current debates in India on Dalit writing opens up the possibility of revisiting our own literary traditions from a new vantage point.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Most translations of Dalit autobiographies have been done in the last ten odd years. Cfr. Laxman Mane's *Upava* (trans. A. K. Kamat, Sahitya Akademi, 1997); Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (trans. P. A. Kolharkar, Sahitya Akademi, 1998); Bama's *Karakku* (trans. from Tamil original by Lakshmi Holstrom, Macmillan, 2000); Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* (Penguin, 2003); Lambale's *Akkarmashi* (trans. from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar, OUP, 2003); Valmiki's *Joothan* (trans. by Arun Prabha Mukherjee from Hindi, Colombia University Press, 2003); Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild* (trans. Rita Kothari, OUP, 2004); Sharmila Rege's compilation of Dalit women's *testimonios* is another recent addition. Baby Kamble's *The prisons we broke* (trans. from Marathi by Maya Pandi, Chennai : Orient Longman, 2008)
2. Cuba was one of the three major centres of slavery in the New World along with Brazil and the south of US. While slave trade was officially banned in the US in 1808, it continued well after mid-19th century in Latin America and until the very end of it in Cuba and Puerto Rico, the two Caribbean islands that remained as colonial outposts till well after the others had achieved independence from Spain.
3. Retamar insists that "the basic precondition for understanding our literature...is the understanding of our world" (78). This kind of concrete positioning calls for first of all clearly demarcating what constitutes and what does not constitute literature. Fernández Retamar discusses Latin American literary critics like Alfonso Reyes and José Antonio Portuondo and the Russian formalists on the question of "literarity" and quotes from a 1927 essay of Tynjanov entitled "On Literary Evolution" which is of particular relevance for our discussion on the *testimonio* and Dalit autobiography :

The very existence of a fact as *literary* depends on its...function. What in one epoch would be a literary fact would in another be a common matter of social communication, and vice-versa...Thus the friendly letter of Derzavin is a social fact. The friendly letter of the Karamzin and Pushkin epoch is a literary fact. Thus one has the literariness of memoirs and diaries in one system and their extraliterariness in another. (Retamar, 85)
4. Neither should this be confused with the Soviet approach to socialist realism. Cuban antipathy to socialist realism as a formula for revolutionary writing is seen in none other than Che as for example in "Man and Socialism in Cuba."

5. Something similar happened with cinema too. For a long time, Western critics had been using conventional categories to analyse Latin American, particularly Cuban cinema. The Western critics' (mis)reading of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* as the angst of an intellectual at crossroads in post-revolutionary Cuba lead Alea to articulate the ideological and theoretical premise of his cinematic work. The same happened in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil etc. leading to a body of some of the finest writing on what has come to be known as "Third Cinema".

COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND POLITICS : MULI'S LIFE HISTORY

Autobiography may not have been a traditional literary genre in Indian culture, but from the nineteenth century onwards we begin to find texts that narrate personal lives. Critical studies of these personal narratives have been slow to emerge. The few Indian autobiographies which have widely drawn attention of the researchers world-wide are : M. K. Gandhi's *Autobiography or My Experiment with Truth* (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography* (1963), Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) and a few others. Gandhi, Nehru and Chaudhuri, individually represent different world-views, but socio-culturally they belong to a common category, i.e. they were upper caste men and hence privileged to speak to the world. In recent times there has been a considerable number of critical studies on Indian upper caste women's autobiographies. On the other hand, Dalits, who have been raising their voices for quite some time through their respective personal narratives were rarely heard of and thus systematically neglected in the academic circle.

One important aspect about studying Dalit autobiographies is that they cannot be appreciated or properly evaluated in terms of the existing conventions of evaluating autobiographies written by the educated upper caste writers. Many of these narratives have not, in fact, been written down. They have been orally communicated and then recorded by others. For instance, the moving life-story of an unlettered ex-untouchable Muli titled *Untouchable : An Indian Life History* (1979) has been recorded by an American anthropologist James Freeman. Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire* (Marathi : 1988) and

Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine's *Viramna : Life of an Untouchable* are two similar collaborative works. The present paper makes an attempt to study the various aspects of "mediated autobiographies" with special reference to James Freeman's *Untouchable : An Indian Life History*.

The Western world discovered in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* the genre of autobiography, which was written as early as the fourth century A.D. In contrast to the West, the tradition of writing autobiography came to exist in India quite late. To be more specific, Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanaka* (1641) is considered to be the first Indian autobiography, written in Hindi verse in the early part of the seventeenth century. At this point several questions can be asked, e.g. why did it take several centuries for the genre to emerge in India as compared to its earlier emergence in the West? Does it need a specific cultural space for its emergence, which was not available in India then? Does a literary genre depend upon certain philosophical pre-conditions? These questions will, perhaps, lead us to have a look at the nature of Indian caste society and its dominant Hindu world-view, which shapes the mind of an individual.

There have been a number of autobiographies written after Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanaka*. Indian autobiographies are written by persons coming from different and divergent fields of activities. Among them are authors, journalists, artists, academicians, politicians, social workers, philosophers, civil servants, public figures and others. While the autobiographies written by men outnumbered women's autobiographies, nevertheless Indian women had distinctions to narrate their personal life-stories as early as the second part of the nineteenth century. Earlier free education was not available to them. Dalits, on the other hand, have started narrating their life-stories only after Independence because education was denied to them for quite a long time. It is the newly independent nation-state that made provisions for their free and compulsory education through the enactment of constitution, which helped Dalits to articulate themselves. Thus the emergence of Dalit autobiography is a distinct genre by itself. Indian autobiographical tradition is diverse and therefore while studying it one has to bear in mind issues centering on caste, class, culture, religion, gender etc. This makes the reading of Indian autobiography complex.

The emergence of Dalit autobiography gives a new dimension to the study of autobiography. Apart from being marginal, Dalits have been denied education for quite a long time in Indian caste society. Now that they are getting educated, some of them have been using writing as a weapon for their social assertion. Thus writing autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilise resistance against oppression. This phenomenon will be largely understood when we critically analyse some of the Dalit autobiographies, such as, Hazari's *Untouchable : An Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), Laxman Mane's *Upara* (Marathi, 1984), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (Marathi, 1984), D. P. Das' *The Untouchable Story* (1985), Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil : 1992) and *Sanghati* (Tamil : 2000), Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap Aani Amhi* (Marathi, 1993) Vasant Moon's *Vasti*, (Marathi, 1995), Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the IAS* (English, 1997), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (Hindi, 1997), Laxman Gaikward's *Uchalya* (Marathi, 1998), D. R. Jatav's *A Silent Soldier : An Autobiography* (English : 2000) and Shyamlal's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (English, 2001).

As stated earlier, illiteracy among Dalits is common. Even if they try to get education facing all odds, all of them are not successful in their adventures. They cannot write their autobiographies of their own. But they can narrate their life-stories to others who can help to document them. The narrated autobiography of Muli comes under this category. It has been collected in Oriya and then translated into English by James M. Freeman, an American anthropologist with title, the *Untouchable : An Indian Life History*. Muli comes from the very backward state of Orissa where the general literacy rate is abysmally low even today. In this case we can well imagine the literacy standard among the Dalits of Orissa. A narrated autobiography such as Muli's invites the following questions : should oral autobiographies be read in the same way as a written autobiography? What is the difference between the two? The following pages will try to seek answers to the questions raised above.

Philippe Lejeune, an authority on autobiography resolves the conflicting issue centering around orality and literacy stating that

narrated autobiographies have the same authenticity as well as legitimacy as the written autobiographies, sometimes even more. Because, Lejeune explains, "On a certain number of points, autobiography by people who do not write throws light on autobiography written by those who do : the imitation reveals the secrets of fabrication and functioning of "the natural" product."¹ He strongly suggests the idea of "autobiographical collaborations" so that the voice of illiterate people like Muli can be heard more often. Lejeune also puts forward a thesis stating that the common masses all over the world are absolutely silent over the years not because they are unread simpletons but because they are the victims of the ruling elites. To quote Lejeune :

Why this "silence"? Because they did not know either how to read or how to write, and they transmitted their memories orally? It would be naive to think so. Education became widespread throughout the nineteenth century. But those who knew how to read and write used their education for other ends, in other forms : why, or for whom, would they have written the story of their life ? Behind this problem of literacy and acculturation is hidden another : that of the network of communication of the printed work, and of the function of the texts and discourse that are exchanged through its channel. This network is in the hands of the ruling classes and serves to promote their values and their ideology. Their autobiographical narratives, quite obviously, are not written only to "pass on memory" (which is done through word and example in all classes). They are the place where a collective identity is elaborated, reproduced, and transformed, *the patterns of life* appropriate to the ruling classes. This identity is imposed upon all those who belong to or are assimilated into these classes, and it rejects the others as insignificant.²

Muli, naturally the 'other' is more than an 'insignificant' character for the Oriya/Indian ruling classes so far as his collaborative autobiography with James Freeman is concerned. Born into a poor Dalit family in the state capital of Orissa, Bhubaneswar, Muli had probably all the advantages of grabbing new opportunities provided by a civil society in the wake of India's independence. But Muli's untouchable caste identity was his big disadvantage. In his childhood he was thrown

out from school just because he happened to come from a supposedly polluted community called Bauri. After that he tried several professions : he became a daily wage labourer, small shopkeeper, sharecropper, etc. Given the situation that all these jobs required a strong body Muli chose to become a pimp supplying prostitutes and transvestites to the upper caste men to make easy money. The fact that Muli had weak physique -- and of course a lazy mind -- the job of a pimp suited him. But money was not all Muli wanted in his life. As an individual he wanted dignity, self-respect which as an untouchable he did not get so easily. The tensions build up through his narrative. Muli's attempt to define a self was rejected by the upper caste men and women in their day-to-day relationship with him. This makes Muli's life history significant, James Freeman writes.

The story of Muli's life may move others, as it did me, to ponder their own experiences in ways they had previously neglected. An authentic life-history confronts us with an immediacy and concreteness that compels our involvement, that causes us to discover within ourselves something about human predicaments everywhere in the face of which our cultural differences become insignificant. Muli presents such a life-history. The cultural idiom in which he operates may be foreign to us, but his aims are not : he strives for dignity ; he seeks to be respected by the people around him ; he questions why fate has brought him to his present circumstances ; he wants a good life for himself. As he approaches what he thinks of as old age, Muli sees his dream of achieving a good life slipping by ; a bleak end awaits him. He expresses no hopes of salvation or a better existence in a future life. His particular beliefs are guided by his cultural setting, but his predicament is not. (p. 396)

Since Muli's predicament was also the predicament of the untouchable community as a whole, it is quite important to see how Muli engaged his 'narrative self' while fighting against the 'communal self' of the discriminatory society he belonged to. It is also important to study the cultural milieu in which Muli grew up. But before analysing Muli's life-history in detail, let us briefly discuss the background in which Muli's "collaborative autobiography" came into being.

As stated earlier, it was James Freeman, an American anthropologist who collected the story of Muli's life in Oriya, translated it into English and published it with a title *Untouchable : An Indian Life History*. Freeman knew Oriya but he was also helped by an interpreter named Hari. *Untouchable* contains a total of 31 chapters. Except for chapters 1, 2, 3 which are clubbed together as Introduction and 30 and 31 as Conclusion which are written by Freeman, the remaining 26 chapters are Muli's version of his own life as told to Freeman. Freeman writes in the Introduction that he never interfered with Muli nor influenced him in any way except that he had to provoke him in some places to narrate in detail some of the interesting events of his life. Muli was quite selective in narrating his life-stories. He did not realise that Freeman would help him to connect each episode of his life to a single idea of development of his marginal self. Perhaps Freeman's concern about 'equality of all mankind' drew him closer to Muli and the people of his community whom he witnessed as the victims of caste oppression. Becoming a "collaborator" of Muli's autobiography Freeman did immense service to the oppressed people at large. In the Conclusion he writes, "by recording the lives and sufferings of Muli and his people, I hope that I have helped to hasten the day when such sufferings cease, not only for Indian untouchables, but for all victims of social inequality." (p. 396) This activist vision of Freeman does not in any way suggest that he was biased in favour of Muli and his community. Freeman, on the other hand, was impartial and serious about his academic ethics. While show-casing Muli's life-history he goes to the extent of writing that, "A detailed life-history like Muli's provides a way to reach behind the surface answers outsiders often receive, grasping from the insider's perspective what he really values and how he interprets his experiences." (p. 12) We must acknowledge here that it was due to Freeman's earnest efforts to project "Muli as he was" that earned him recognition as the author of the book *Untouchable*, worldwide.

Muli, like Hazari, was a pseudonym. He belonged to the Bauris,¹ an untouchable caste group in Orissa who did not have a fixed traditional occupation at least till the seventies of the twentieth century, when Freeman was collecting Muli's life-history. The Bauris earned their

livelihood by doing odd jobs such as, stone cutting, road building, weaving etc. Most of them were landless and that brought insecurity in their lives. A majority of them were daily wage labourers. Since they belonged to one of the socially and religiously 'polluted' groups, social mobility was a distant dream. Freeman reports that though subsidiary castes such as Mallias, who were a little above the Bauris in the caste hierarchy, had amply benefited from the opportunities offered by the new capital city, Bhubaneswar which was located three kilometers away from Muli's village, Kapileswar and is now a part of Bhubaneswar city, the Bauris had stagnated over the years. The reasons for their pitiable conditions could be several: lack of education and lack of resources including land could be cited as main factors. Also limited contacts outside their community compelled the Bauris to work as unskilled labourers, something they had been doing for many generations. It will be relevant here to recall that due to protective discriminatory provisions enshrined in the Indian Constitution the Dalits of various Indian states have improved educationally and economically to a certain extent, but Oriya Dalits have lagged behind by not availing such opportunities to their full extent. One important reason for this may be that Oriya society is still very feudal, which means that the state does not easily allow any modern democratic values to enter and upset the traditional power structure. The ingrained exploitative aspects of caste and their economic consequences remain the same, even stronger today than they were some thirty years ago when Freeman was doing his field study. Therefore, the Bauris like other untouchable communities in Orissa still continue to do unskilled poorly paid jobs that deny them anything more than basic subsistence earnings. Inheriting such a stigmatized social role Muli seemed to be a handicapped person both socially and economically.

Muli also belonged to a large joint family which could hardly think of any economic security and hence lived on the brink of starvation throughout the year. Muli remembered how as a child he along with other members of his family starved almost daily.

We were always hungry; most of the time we starved. Father's income alone was insufficient to feed us. Because mother was usually pregnant,

or nursing babies, she rarely worked in the fields. We ate whatever we could find – snails from the river, leaves, and rice from the fields. Once a day the adults ate cooked food, mostly pakhalā (watered rice), but they gave most of it to us. I remember that when I was five years old we ate hot cooked rice only very rarely, once every two weeks, and it was a great feast for us. We usually ate freshly cooked hot rice too fast. To make it feed more people, we let it cool and added water. We ate this watered rice most of the time. (p. 66)

Given above is a grim picture of a family which struggled to keep itself going. Muli and his family members later suffered more with more food scarcity, particularly with the onset of monsoon. This was a time when agricultural labourers did not get work in the fields. This was also a time when most of the government – sponsored road work and other wage work ceased temporarily. The poor people suffered mercilessly and still struggled hard to make ends meet waiting for a better future. When nothing came through, the only option available to them was to mortgage precious things they had at home. In the case of Muli's family the mortgage was either for bell metal or for other cheap silver crockery, which fetched them a little food, but would not last long. They would go without food for many days. The circumstance would force Muli's father to steal taro from somebody's field so that at least children were fed.

Facing all these adversities most of the Dalit families cannot set a goal to achieve something higher. Their time and energy are spent for daily food. In this context education as an opportunity for job prospects can be highly recommended. But going by the track record of the upper caste, the prospect seemed grim. Not that Muli did not try for an education. Like other parents who wish their children to be educated enough to get a secure job, Muli's father as well as grandfather sent him to a local school. Muli also appreciated their ideas realising that once properly educated his qualification would automatically ensure him a better-paid job, not available to any member of his community (p. 67). Muli enthusiastically worked hard to achieve his goal but his

local environment did not allow him to pursue his studies. Orissa, being one of the most caste-prone societies, several manifestations of

caste prejudices are witnessed in schoolrooms. Muli tells us, how he was always maltreated.

The villagers never forgot, nor did they let us forget, that we were untouchables. High caste children sat inside the school; the Bami children, about twenty of us, sat outside on the veranda and listened. The two teachers, a Brahman outsider, and a temple servant, refused to touch us even with a stick. To beat us, they threw bamboo canes. The higher-caste children threw mud at us. Fearing severe beatings, we dared not fight back. (p. 67)

The passage sufficiently demonstrates the hostility of the school environment where the Dalit children were discouraged to attend the classes. It only underlines the hidden agenda of the upper castes who are afraid that once Dalits are given a chance to study, they will go on to become powerful. Moreover, who will do their menial work if all of them are educated? Muli was an immediate casualty of this attitude and as a result he became a dropout from school. Starvation forced him to be a child labourer. He helped his parents by adding a little earning to their meager income at the cost of doing strenuous physical labour. Earlier we have already seen how Muli did not get proper food to eat – let alone a balanced diet. As a consequence, Muli, like many children of his community often fell sick and constantly nursed a weak body throughout his life.

This suffering of Muli brings out attention to a larger existential question that the Dalits in Orissa, and elsewhere, face on a day-to-day basis. They have been and continue to be downtrodden and oppressed because of their repression by the caste system. Predominantly rural and illiterate, they have lived in sub-human conditions and suffered economic exploitation, cultural subjugation and political powerlessness.⁴ The recent reports on the study of untouchability and atrocities on Dalits reveal that Orissa is one state where public places are still not accessible to Dalits. There are also violent incidents perpetrated on Dalits but organized protests from Dalit groups are not reported in equal measure. This shows the general backwardness and powerlessness of Dalits in Orissa who continue to bear the social injustices perpetrated on them by the upper castes.⁵

Living in such an environment where insecurity reigns, Oriya Dalits always have to work hard and lead a life of compromise and alienation. One reason for this may have to do with the socio-economic life of Dalits in Orissa, which has not undergone the level of change that Dalits have experienced elsewhere, for example in Maharashtra. History testifies that a few cases of unorganized and sporadic resistances did take place against caste atrocities,⁶ but they were swiftly suppressed. In fact, leaders of these resistance movements invariably came from within the fold of Hinduism. The ruling class has used the pervasive cult of Jagannath and other deities to mould the consciousness of Dalits to a point that has blunted the edge of their protests. The legend of Dasia Bauri⁷ and many others testify to this. Citing various myths and legends Muli and his community members were denied entry into temples including the Jagannath temple in Puri. Instead of protesting against such perverted practices to reclaim their civil rights Muli and his community continued to remain content with their degraded ritual status. Muli, in the following passage brings this issue clearly :

I remember Granny as a smiling, peaceful, gentle person, and very religious; every evening, she set out her clay oil lamp for deities and offered them rice. She often fasted for the deities and visited many temples to worship deities, even though she was not allowed in. From outside the temple she watched, and gave her greetings. For four or five years during the Shivaratri festival [birthday of the deity Shiva] she went to the Dhabaleswar temple, which stands in the middle of the Mahanadi River, and burned a clay lamp full of oil. She also went to Puri every two years or so to visit Lord Jagannath, but she never went inside the temple. I myself went into the outer compound of the Jagannath temple for the first time only in 1970. I did not go into the inner room : I have never seen anybody of my caste enter the temple compound before this time. (p. 124)

Muli seemed to be a rebel at heart when it came to various socio-cultural practices dictated by his community. Even as a child Muli violated the prescriptive norms of his community and created tensions among its members. For instance, Muli at the age of sixteen, rejecting the traditional Bauri profession became an unskilled labourer, and later

a pimp supplying Bauri women and transvestites to upper caste men. He continued to stay in this profession for quite a long time, till he attained the age of forty. To become a pimp or prostitute was not common among the Bauri community. Thus by choosing this profession Muli disregarded his community norms not overtly but covertly. Overtly he went through the motions that represented "respectable" behaviour. Covertly, he broke the rules, showing no guilt whatsoever in doing so. Interestingly, he portrayed his prostitutes and transvestites in similar ways : while giving the appearance of respectability, he also justified his act by saying that they enjoyed the profession and wanted money. This makes Freeman comment, "Throughout his life history, Muli depicted how he, his family, and his friends creatively manipulated, adapted, or disregarded rituals to fit their needs." (p. 389)

After two years of studying the Bauri community at close quarters Freeman comes to the conclusion that Muli's own life-style represented one of three possible adaptations ordinarily available to Bauri men and women : the life of unskilled labourers, the life of shamanistic faith healers, and the life of transvestites, pimps and prostitutes. Muli seemed to have exceptional adaptability in coping with perpetual poverty and social discrimination. As stated earlier, Muli's health was weak from his childhood. Adding to this was his general laziness that made his job as farm labourer and quarry worker really tough. He found his way to earn easy money by pimping, the profession which fitted his physical (dis)abilities and psychological outlook. The profession of a pimp brought Muli into closer association with wealthy and powerful upper caste men. He admired them and wanted to emulate high caste life-style. Muli befriended many of these men – not only to get money, he also wanted them to reciprocate his friendship by showing him due respect in public which he seldom got in return. Many high caste men, sometimes shared meals with Muli and his prostitutes and spoke about their friendship in flowery language, but they cautioned Muli at the end that their friendship must remain a secret and never be disclosed publicly. Muli resented this severing relationship with the men he did not find to be true friends.

Thus, throughout his life Muli displayed a behaviour rarely found among untouchables. Muli constructed his self according to his

circumstantial need otherwise he would have found it difficult to survive. At times he played the role of a pimp, sharecropper and small businessman, but he failed in every venture. Because of his personal failure people of his community including his extended family members did not take him seriously and the upper caste men whom he supplied prostitutes and transvestites avoided him regardless of his personal quality. Muli's life history thus provides an insider's view of the psychological effects of discrimination against people at the bottom of society. Like all Bams Muli regularly experienced rejection in public places simply because being an untouchable he had the potential of polluting the higher castes. Muli deeply resented such discrimination but mockingly described how high caste women avoided his presence lest he would pollute them, how tea stall owners refused to allow him to enter their shops, how the high caste men barely tolerated him as long as he supplied them with prostitutes. It is in this context Freeman rightly observes that, "Muli expected to be insulted, avoided, and cheated in his everyday contact with higher caste people, and he retaliated by cheating them." (p. 383)

Muli tried to escape such discrimination by emulating his oppressors, on whom he had to depend totally for his survival. When they rejected him, he immediately retaliated by trying to bring them under his control, often by supplying them with prostitutes or by changing his clients; and when successful, he laughed at their behaviour of surrendering their 'self' to a mere untouchable like him. Muli knew well how to play with his generous landowning masters, construction employers, or customers for his prostitutes; he pretended his loyalty in front of them but privately ridiculed them for their behaviour and ideals. Thus, Muli's acquiescence to his superiors does not in any way prove that he accepted his lot.

But, on the whole Muli was a failure. In spite of his change of roles and various self-inventions, he could not reconcile his individual self and his social identity. Ultimately, Muli failed in his endeavours to get social recognition for which he disgraced his community codes, writes Freeman,

Muli's life-history portrayed conflicts between the ideals of his caste, his own expectations, and his actual behaviour. Muli's thwarted

expectations led him to idealize his youth. His attempted adaptations were in the long run unsuccessful. He failed to solve both his internal problem of negative self-image and the external problem faced by almost all untouchables of his village – poverty, discrimination, and failure to benefit from the growth of the new city. Pimpung brought Muli no improvement over the other available life style choices – hard physical labour and religious healing. No Bami labourers or healers in the village have improved their economic or social situation in the past decade, while high caste people have benefited enormously from urbanization.... Muli's life history thus is representative of the condition of most Bams, who try to improve their situation but fail. (pp. 387-388)

Muli's failure can be explained by his low caste position. Whenever Muli started a new business venture his failure was predetermined. Muli at one point started a betel selling business. He became the first and only untouchable of his village to hold a permanent spot in the busy market place of Bhubaneswar. Up to a point he succeeded, but once people came to know that he was an untouchable, they would not buy betel from his shop. This kind of caste discrimination in business persists all over India, even today. Dalits can hardly be found opening up hotels and similar business ventures because they are regarded as carriers of pollution. And if they still go for such a venture, it might cost them their lives as well.

Muli's last debacle came directly from a miserly Brahman landowner, named Jadu. Muli became Jadu's sharecropper hoping that it would fetch him a good amount of paddy bringing an end to his economic insecurity. This time he really worked hard. But finally he got cheated by Jadu. Muli discovered that Jadu never owned any land; he sharecropped the land for a goldsmith, who had recently sold it to an oilpresser. After a year's long labour when Muli came to harvest his share of the crop, the oilpresser chased him off the land and called the police to arrest him as a thief. Muli, on his part, did not go to the police or any court of law as he knew very well that a poor untouchable like him could never get justice as laws in India are always in favour of the rich upper caste. Instead, Muli demanded his due from Jadu and when he failed to get it, quarreled with him in front of a crowd gathered at the village tea stall, exchanging insults and curses. He appealed to the high caste

men present there that they should help him get justice. Although the high caste men supported Muli, they did not force the miser to pay him for cultivating the crop. Muli finally did not get his due. But he, once again, broke his conventional role as a meek and docile untouchable. Muli was thus the first untouchable in his village who dared to publicly challenge and insult a Brahman who ritually commanded the superior position in social hierarchy.

At the end of *Untouchable* Freeman brings an important issue for interrogation — what is Muli's future likely to be? Seeing his helpless state throughout the narrative one cannot hope for a better future for Muli and his community. At least, not Freeman. After twenty years of the publication of Muli's life-history one would expect that the children and grandchildren of Muli might be doing better in social and economic fronts compared to the wretched conditions of Muli and his people. But the empirical existential conditions of Dalits in Orissa in general and the Bauris in particular tell us that nothing much has changed since the days of Muli. In fact, this future prospect of Muli and his community has already been indicated by Freeman himself in the following passage :

Untouchables throughout India rarely claim to be proud of their place in society; instead, individually or in groups, many attempt to pass as "clean" high castes by changing their names, customs, occupations, and dress to those of the "clean" castes. Others deny their caste by converting to anti-caste religions such as Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity. Still others join political groups that cut across caste lines. In the anonymity of cities, untouchables usually can blot out more of their past than those who reside in villages, but the process, slow and painful, often takes generations. In Muli's village, where untouchables depend for their livelihood on higher caste employers, denials of untouchability provoke severe high-caste economic retaliation, if not physical violence. Thus external conditions have doomed Muli and most of the people of his caste to failure no matter what they choose to do, and Muli's adaptations reflect this situation. Muli and other Bauris have failed, not because they embody expectations of failure or accept their lot, but rather because the Bauris face social and economic disabilities that they are presently powerless to change. (p. 397)

It is true that Oriya Dalits still lack a strong hold on the social and political activities of the state. But in literary and cultural fronts they have been displaying some organized efforts, both individually and collectively, to break the culture of silence so that the voices of protest of the Oriya Dalits can be heard. The growing number of Oriya Dalit poets, writers and activists prove this point clearly. Although Oriya Dalit literature still lacks firm roots, it is slowly but unmistakably taking shape.⁶ It is needless to emphasise here that Muli's life-story remains an example for many Oriya Dalit writers to emulate his protest in their writings to form a distinct Oriya Dalit identity. This makes Muli's life-history significant.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Philippe Lejeune. 1989. *On Autobiography*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. p.186.
2. Ibid. p. 198.
3. To know more about their social and economic life, political participation, cultural settings, life cycle, spiritual foundations, etc. refer the report titled, "Bauris : A Scheduled Caste Community of Orissa", prepared by National Institute of Social Work and Social Sciences (NISWASS), Bhubaneswar, 1995.
4. For a recent reading on the plights of Oriya Dalits refer to Revati Ballav Tripathy, *Dalits : A Sub-Human Society*, Ashish Publishing, New Delhi, 1994.
5. On the nature of untouchability practices and incidents of atrocities against Dalits in Orissa two project reports are available : "A study on the problems of Untouchability with emphasis on the incidents of the atrocities on Harijans in Orissa", prepared by NISWASS, Bhubaneswar, 1984 ; and "A Study of the Protection of Civil Rights Act in Orissa," prepared by Anup Kumar Dash and Raj Kumar for NISWASS, Bhubaneswar, 1994.
6. See for example, Prasant Kumar Pradhan, "Nirvedia Andolana : A Lower-Caste Movement of Cuttack and Puri Districts of Orissa (1966 - 79)" in *Proceedings of Orissa History Congress*, XIX Annual Session, Bhubaneswar, 1994.

7. Dasia Bauri, an untouchable was supposed to be a great devotee of Lord Jagannath. The myth goes that Jagannath Himself had to come out from Puri temple at the dead hour of midnight to take offerings of Dasia Bauri for the simple reason that the latter could not enter into the temple for his lowly birth. Muli happens to be a descendent of this mythical figure.
8. For a discussion on Oriya Dalit literature refer Raj Kumar. "Oriya Dalit Literature : A Historical Perspective", *The Fourth World : Journal of the Marginalised People*, No. 2 (October 1995), NISWASS, Bhubaneswar.

**DALIT WRITING IN BANGLA:
REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE IN
MANORANJAN BYAPARI AND MANJU BALA'S NARRATIVES**

The category, 'Dalit literature in Bangla', has not enjoyed much currency among literary historians and scholars of Bangla literary culture. While scholars have regularly identified themes of social, and even specifically caste-based oppression and resistance in Bangla literature of various genres, 'Dalit writing in Bangla' has seldom, if at all, been considered as an ontological or epistemological possibility. Thus, the term 'Dalit literature', which has come to be strongly associated with Kannada or Marathi literatures (because of the fact that a Dalit literary 'movement' may be seen to have developed in these languages), does not normally imply a substantial body of literature in Bangla. Thus, when GN Devy, while introducing the English translation of one of the seminal works of Marathi Dalit literature, defines the parameters of the 'Dalit movement', he remains silent on Bangla as a language of Dalit expression :

Implicit in every literary work of significance is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth. However, rarely do a number of such works get produced within a relatively short span of time. Rarely do they change not just the established literary idiom but also the thought processes and the social ethics of the community of readers. When this does happen, literary history describes the phenomenon as a literary movement. A movement strikes the heart of a social issue in such a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. A movement goes much beyond a mere style-shift and spearheads a greater social change too... The Dalit literary movement that has been flourishing in Marathi — as in several other Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Gujarati — during the last four decades will probably be

recognised by the future historians of Indian literature as another such movement. (Devy 2003: xiii)

While it may be true that a Dalit 'movement' in the sense that devy defines it above may not have gathered momentum in Bangla in the way it has in Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati, the notion that no body of 'Dalit literature in Bangla' exists, that the closest that one gets within the archive of Bangla literature is a body of (sympathetic) works written on caste-based oppression written not by those at the receiving end of the caste system but by reformist 'upper-caste' writers need not be taken at face value. This notion may, at one level, be one that affords us a certain degree of comfort and complacency because it may imply the corollary that caste discrimination is absent in Bangla and posit that premise in a relationship of causality with the perceived absence of 'Dalit writing in Bangla'. Yet, the fact that this can be little more than a myth becomes evident the moment one returns to the recurring headlines about atrocities on members of the 'lower-castes'.

Perhaps one needs to first understand and remember the peculiar dynamics of production and circulation of Dalit writing in Bangla before one realizes that this is a body of work that may be extant though largely invisible and understand the reasons behind this marginalisation. There are, in fact, a number of Dalit writers who write in Bangla today about caste discrimination faced by the Dalit community. But most of this work appears not in the so-called 'mainstream' publications or as volumes published by reputed publishers with substantial distribution prowess. Rather, much of this work appears in little magazines that have limited circulation, in specialised Dalit periodicals (e.g., *Adal Badal*, *Chaturtha Duniya*, etc.) and publications and sometimes in the form of self-published volumes.³ In each of these cases, the visibility accorded to this body of work by readers outside the Dalit community remains limited. Thus, it becomes not too difficult for people from outside this circle to remain conveniently unaware of its very existence. Yet, Dalit writers themselves have today started becoming more and more vocal about the presence of this body of writing and stressing the need to take note of it — something that may be identified with the germination of what Devy would call a 'movement'. A case in point is Manoranjan Hyapari's recent essay in *Economic and Political Weekly*.⁴

Much of this body of literature I am referring to is concerned with depicting those very privations that the caste-oppressed has had to face, perhaps not necessarily at the individual level -- that would merely be tantamount to identifying autobiographical strands in non-autobiographical genres -- but at a broader, community level. The experience of being labelled a 'Dalit' perhaps empowers a writer to be palpably aware of larger, community-based Dalit experiences vis-a-vis caste discrimination and oppression, and to give shape and form and body to tales heard, remarks overheard, fears and fantasies harboured, and of course, memories and injuries nurtured.⁵ Embodying the same implies bearing testimony to not necessarily a *fact-based*, objective reality but to an apparently more subjective, if no less *truthful* and systemic one. Can this body of Dalit literature in Bangla, therefore, not be related perhaps to the genre of testimonial literature without simply reducing the attempt to do so to a mere hunt for 'life' in 'work' ⁶ in the basest, most simplistic and most denotative sense? That seems to be the challenge in trying to read a body of Dalit writing in terms of the idiom of testimonial literature.

Not only are we talking here of a question of quantity — it is surely not enough to say that there is a substantial body of Dalit literature in Bangla that manages to germinate, survive and proliferate day by day. A more-than-cursory glance at this corpus should indicate that given the right (read unprejudiced) reception, it may well evolve into a 'movement', i.e., into an entity that "strikes the heart of a social issue in such a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort...and spearheads a greater social change". There is no dearth of powerful writers in this group; and one should not have too much difficulty in identifying the value of many of their works as documents of our social realities once one sensitises oneself to the fact that Dalit writing has its own dynamics, its own set of motivations, and often its own mode of expression.

Moreover, Dalit writing in Bangla is not even only about bearing testimony to a given social reality; it concerns itself not just with depicting the material reality, but often involves itself with portraying the possibility of change. That the point is to change the very social realities that engender this corpus is an agenda that comes out very strongly in much of contemporary Dalit writing in Bangla. While there

are many different political inspirations behind these writings — Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Marx and most often, Ambedkar -- the call for effecting change is very clear in the works of many of the writers we are talking about — writers like Manoranjan Byapari, Manju Bala, Brajen Mallik and Manohar Mouli Biswas, as well as writers like Mahutosh Biswas, Kapil Thakur, and Nitish Biswas, for whom class is perhaps a more abiding concern than caste.

This comes out so very clearly, for instance, in the short stories of Manoranjan Byapari; Byapari is evidently not content with merely a 'realistic' depiction that would evoke sympathy from the reader — Ambedkar's philosophy of 'Educate, Organise, Agitate' seems to be deeply ingrained in his works. Even in the poetry of a writer like Manju Bala, who is far less overt than the sometimes militant (and therefore all the more powerful) Byapari, the call for revolution is palpable even in her characteristic understatement.

Manoranjan Byapari's identity as a writer rests on his Dalit interpellation. His foray into the world of creative writing has been literally against all odds. Byapari's family crossed over into present-day West Bengal from what is today Bangladesh and was directed by the government to go and settle in the distant and unproductive Dwandakaranya, as many families had to. His father refused initially and this resulted in their being deprived of the government support. Forced into extreme penury, the family was finally left with no option but to uproot itself once again and leave for Dwandakaranya. Born into such distressful circumstances and growing up in extreme poverty, Byapari says he has been palpably conscious of the way his caste identity has shaped the way many people he has met have responded to him.⁷ Byapari has worked as a rickshawalla in Kolkata and has taught himself to read and write Bangla. He first emerged as a writer when Mahasweta Devi spotted his talent and published his autobiographical piece, "Rickshaw Chalai" (written under the pen-name, Madan Dutta) in her periodical, *Bartika*. Even after that, it has been a protracted struggle for him to establish himself as a writer. He works as a cook at a school for the deaf-mute and writes stories and novels in Bangla.

"Ribaj (Rewaj)" is the seventh story of his short-story collection called *Jyubishar Galpa*. Unlike most of the other stories in this collection, "Ribaj" has a rural setting. And this proves to be significant

in determining the course the story takes. The location of the story is, in fact, organic to its *stoff*. It is worth noting that several Bengali Dalit writers seem to imagine in their works a sharp divide between the city and the village in terms of attitudes to caste; this seems to be true of Byapari as well. Many of Byapari's city stories are very powerful and moving; but seldom do they focus on caste discrimination as their major preoccupation. Several of his stories are woven round the lives of the Kolkata rickshawalla; surely, they are born, if not directly, then at least indirectly, out of his own experiences as a rickshawalla in Kolkata. Yet, these do not focus so much on caste (if at all) as on class. Thus, "Maar" (A Threshing) is written in the first person from the point of view of the secretary of a rickshaw 'line' or stand. The narrator is a politically motivated individual and is responsible for collecting the monthly party subscription from members of his 'line' and is committed to his cause. Yet this story hardly ever brings up the question of caste identity and how it affects the lives of the characters; it is rather, about the political disillusionment that creeps in and about how the labouring class and its aspirations and dreams for a life of dignity are decimated by addiction and substance abuse.

Likewise, "Manusher Mukh" (The Face of Humanity), another story involving a rickshawalla called Bimal Mistry, remains almost silent on questions of caste. It is the poverty of the protagonist's family, his hand to mouth existence and the humiliation and guilt he has to undergo because of his poverty that is foregrounded by the author. When the story climaxes and reaches its most poignant moment, the gentleman on Bimal's rickshaw says :

"What do you people think, huh? You demand a higher fare because it's raining; you demand a higher fare because it's dark; you demand a higher fare because it's the pujo season. You only want more and more. We are in service. Our salary at the end of the month is fixed. How do you expect us to pay more? Why should we?" (Byapari 2006 : 52; translation mine)

Evidently, it is the question of class that strikes us first. While caste and class identity may be concurrent here,⁸ the notion of caste is never allowed to emerge from the shadow of the class question.

"Ekli Debisthaner Paitan Kahini" (The Tale of How a Shrine Was Set Up) is one of those rare stories by Manoranjan Byapari where even a story set in urban Bengal throws up questions of caste-class concurrence. The story revolves round a rickshaw stand near Jadavpur station. The rickshawallas have a hard time as passengers disembark and immediately relieve themselves beside a banyan tree next to their stand. The stink makes life difficult for the rickshawallas. When all else fails, Abhimanyoo Mandal, the secretary of the rickshaw union, gets an abandoned idol of the goddess Sitala and sets it up near the banyan tree. It immediately stops the piddling. But what is more significant is the way Harinarayan Chakraborty, a Brahmin gambler of the neighborhood sees this as an opportunity. Exploiting Abhimanyoo's well-meaning and socially responsible move, he brings in several more idols, fortifies the place into a full-fledged shrine and profits from the devotion of the people who start thronging the place. Exploiting the gullibility of the devotees, Chakraborty soon becomes a rich man with a two-story house of his own, while the socially responsible Abhimanyoo, who belongs to a Scheduled Caste, remains as poor as he always was. The stink of urine is replaced by the chant of mantras and the smoke of grass and Abhimanyoo is left wondering if the former was not the preferable option.

All of this makes "Ribaj" an important text to look at, particularly in the context of its rural, almost idyllic, location. "Ribaj" is set in 'Banrajya' (literally, the Forest Kingdom). "*Tcendike pahar diye ghera; anyadike nadi. Sabhya jagat theke pray bichhinno ei anchal...*" (Mountains surrounding it on three sides, and a river on the other. This region is almost totally cut-off from civilisation) is how the place is described (Byapari: 29). Economically, too, the place enjoys its own unique dynamics. As the story rolls on, we learn that the economics of physical isolation has given rise to a privileging of a barter system of trade among the villagers. It is only the reach Brahmins (class and caste appear congruent here) of the village who trasgress the boundaries of the village to trade with the outside world. There is a series of living myths that enjoin the non-Brahmin populace not to ever leave the village to trade or interact with the world outside and warn them of the dire consequences of such an act.

The story begins by invoking precisely such an act of transgression. It begins with the return of Maniram to the village :

Maniram has returned to the village after a gap of five years. He had hopped on to a truck that used to transport loads of *segun* wood and had disappeared without saying a word to anybody. There had been no news of him since then; now, he has come back and brought with him a beautiful wife. One would expect the father, Dhulkuram, to be intoxicated with joy at the return of his son with his new bride. But a terrible fear had driven all his intoxication away. His heart was racing. Maniram has flouted the traditions and customs of *Banrajya*, this forest kingdom. He has not taken his wife to pay obeisance at the Linganathan temple. He has not sent his bride for purification at the hands of the Brahmin god. Instead, he has brought her straight home. That is what lies behind Dhulkuram's fears and worries. (29; translation mine)

The very first paragraph highlights the repercussions of the solitude effected by physical isolation and the myth-making imagination. It implies the existence of an alternative space, one where the oppressive laws of this forest kingdom may not apply, a world Maniram has got exposed to, and one that has perhaps changed him in a way as to bring him into direct conflict with the so-called laws of this space. This introductory paragraph also explains the title of the story. 'Ribaj', close to the word, 'rewaj', means 'custom'; in this context, it refers to the custom of every woman married into the village having to be left at the steps of the Linganathan temple for the first three nights so that she can be 'purified' by the Brahmin priest, Deonandan, and his cohorts, all under the express instructions of Linganathan himself (this divine instruction having been revealed exclusively to the Brahmins of course) before the husband can take her home. Divine intervention is used by the powerful Brahmin caste in the village to legitimate their gangrape of the 'lower'-caste women. The story that is in circulation in the village is that the evil goddess Matangi, a rival of Linganathan, lies forever in wait for beautiful virgins, whose vaginas she can infect with the poison of disbelief and disobedience as a first step to taking over all of human society. The only way of stymieing Matangi's nefarious designs is to have women lose their virginity to Brahmins before they can sleep with their husbands. That way, the 'brahmatej', or the semi-divine powers possessed by Brahmins would purify them and neutralise the possibility of Matangi using them in her quest for power. At one level, this is a story that everyone seems to accept without any questions

in the village. Thus, when Maniram comes back after seeing the world and refuses to send his wife for the rites, the villagers think of him as a man who has been corrupted by evil spirits from foreign lands. Thus, even his father, who had had his own wife, Shukhi, purified at the Linganathan temple twenty-five years or so ago, tells him repeatedly to give in and to send his wife to the temple.

Yet, it would be wrong to read Byapari's depiction of the oppressed 'low' caste villagers in such simple terms. The villagers are, in spite of their apparent docility and their apparent hostility to Maniram's ideas, not quite as docile or naive subjects as a first reading might lead us to imagine. Nor is Maniram the first to hoist the pennant of rebellion. During the course of the story, we learn of Budhuram, who had, many years ago, dared to challenge the writ of the Brahmins. He had disappeared and the Mishras had spread the word that this was because of divine intervention – the gods had made him disappear because he had dared to challenge the authority of the Brahmins who were themselves the representatives of the gods. Yet, the story tells us quite clearly that Dholkuram, Maniram's father, knew what had really happened to Budhuram – he had been waylaid and butchered by Mishra's men. Surely, this knowledge should make it very clear to him, if it was not already quite clear that is, that the discourse of the Brahmins was open to being questioned. Why, then, does he still side with the other villagers and demand that his son follow the generations-old inhuman custom? He does so, perhaps, not from a blind and unquestioning acceptance of upper-caste Brahminical discourse, but perhaps out of a fear of the material power that goes hand in hand with that discourse along with, of course, a partial acceptance fuelled by the demands of survival.⁹ Thus, when Maniram, armed with a logic and powers of expression gleaned from his exposure to the outside world, questions, "*To deota sab katha khali oderi bole keno? Ja bole tate amader loksan hov keno?*" (Why does this god only tell them everything? Why is it that everything he tells them goes against us?), and Dholkuram replies: "*Dekh byata, amra nichu jaat. Babhon thakurra amader kono din choov na. Chhowa lege gele gaye mati lepe chan kore. Tara ki shudhi kore shudhhi jagna kore? Deotar adeshe korte badhya hoy*" (Listen, son, we are a low caste. We are untouchables for the Brahmin gods. If they ever touch us, they go and rub earth all over their body

and have a bath to cleanse themselves. Do you think they find it palatable to conduct the purification rites? They have to do it because God has commanded them to do so.), it is not necessarily because he has internalised the Brahmin discourse unquestioningly (Byapari : 35). Rather, he mouths this discourse because he is resigned to his fate and sees no way of challenging the age-old custom: without perhaps realising that with every mouthing and repetition of this discourse, it gets stronger and assumes a truth claim that can only continue to oppress them for ages more. Thus, Maniram is, in a way, no outsider; his exposure to the city, where caste apparently matters less for Byapari, merely allows him to mouth the questions that Dholkuram and so many others in the village can only nurture silently in their breasts. The only difference between him and the others is that he can say, "*Desh dunya dekhe eshechhi*" (I have seen the world outside) and can thereby imagine an alternative (36). He is still very much a part of this milieu; he is one of these people — and that is why his rebellion is more than an individual act of resistance, why his resistance needs to be seen as a sign of things to come. He is not alone — Budhuram has found a following, and so will, we are led to hope, Maniram. This reading is further supported by Deonandan Mishra's thoughts : "*Bhay, boro bhay korche Deonandan, abar ki ar ek Budhuram paida holo naki!*" (A great fear gnaws away inside Deonandan — was he witnessing the birth of another Budhuram here?) (Byapari : 38)

Nor is Dholkuram alone in his world of ambiguous beliefs, in his inability to break out of the oppressive system and challenge the Brahminical discourse even while being aware, at some level, of the hypocrisy and the cruelty that characterise it. Thus, we encounter the following very significant lines in the story :

The village chief nurses his anger. He is the oldest member of this village, and the most respected, too. When his own family had not escaped the Brahmin gods, why should Maniram? He says, "And what if Matangi takes over your wife and starts her tricks, bringing in misfortune and misery? Who will be responsible for that?"

"I will."

"If there is a drought, will your crops be the only ones to wither and die? If the Kotri overflows its banks, will yours be the only house to get submerged? If lightning strikes, will you be the only one to die?"

"Don't act so irresponsibly." (Byapari : 35, translation mine)

Here, it becomes clear that the village chief's motives behind trying to convince Maniram to give in to Deonanan Mishra's demands are more complex than they might first seem. His status quist stance emerges again not necessarily from an unquestioning acceptance of Brahminical discourse; it is also coloured by his own sense of insecurity and feelings of guilt over having had to subject his wife to such humiliation. And these feelings of insecurity, humiliation and guilt tend to veer towards a form of deflected vengeance --- vengeance directed not at the source of the humiliation, the Brahmins whom he is in no position to challenge, but at his own people. Why should somebody else get away without facing what he, his wife and his family had to face? What is further remarkable about this section is the argument the chief uses to try and browbeat Maniram. He tries to invoke emotions of guilt and fear in Maniram by reiterating that the latter would be responsible for the ruin of the entire village; in other words, the spectre of communal destruction and the prospect of individual sacrifice for the greater common good are invoked as incentives to make him toe the line. Here, he appears to be reiterating a discourse that is essentially Brahminical and divisive. Surely, this can prove to be a very effective argument to quell rebellion in the ranks; the moment dissent makes an appearance, the source of the dissent needs to be identified and targeted by inciting other potential dissenters against it.

The same strategy appears in Manju Bala's short story called "Dain". When Swapna, who is from Kolkata and is visiting a village, is identified as the source of a possible threat to the caste-based power structure in the village, it is *Ghanar Ma* (Ghana's Mother), whom she has been trying to educate who is targeted by the Brahmins. They depict *Ghanar Ma* as the innocent bystander who is being incited by the outsider Swapna and who would suffer the deprivations of hell due to no fault of hers. In this way, she is made to turn against Swapna and ends up not only cursing the very Swapna who was trying to help her rise against the unjust social order but also paying the Brahmins a handsome sum of money for purificatory rites ('*shudhdhu korar jagni*'). And Swapna herself is identified as a '*dain*' (witch) by the Brahmins and an '*akshashi*' (rakshashi, or she-demon) by *Ghanar Ma* and is tied up and prepared for sacrifice.

There is one sharp difference between Manoranjan Byapari's story, "Ritaj", and Manju Bala's "Dain". And this difference is crucial to

understanding the politics of their testimonies of Dalit living conditions and caste-based social hierarchies. As in Byapari's story, here too, the city seems to have a redemptive function. It is Swapna, the girl from the city, who tries to explain to *Ghanar Ma* that people like her are being exploited economically by the Brahmins who have made up all kinds of stories about the-world-after and are posing as mediators between man and god precisely to legitimate their power. If exposure to the world gave Maniram the voice to protest and to raise the questions that had lain dormant in the minds of so many of his fellow villagers, it is the city that is seen to be empowering and propelling the discourse of Swapna ("Jabar agey ekto katha shune jaan, Mashima, oi gurudebra theek na. Ora apander mithye bole, mithyei swapna dekhay. Oder dan korle kono punyai hoy na. Apni oi chal bari firiye niye jaan. Barang apander adhpeta kheye thakte hoe na." (28-29)) (One thing you must know before you leave; these gurudevs are not right. They lie to you; they lead you to dream false dreams. You accumulate no virtue by practicing charity towards them. You should take that rice back home. At least you won't have to go to bed on a half-empty stomach). Yet, Manju Bala's characters are etched much more simply than are Byapari's. When *Ghanar Ma* says, "E janme to dukkhko kasta sab to ager jammer paper fal go meye. Tai e janme hamunder daan-dhyan korli fire janme aar dukkhko thakbeni. Ektukkhkheni sukher mukh dekhti pebokkhani takhann. Chhotjaat hoi aar janmate hobeni." (All the misery we face in this birth is the fruit of sins committed in our previous birth, girl. So, if we practice charity towards Brahmins in this life, we won't have to suffer in our next birth. We will know a little bit of happiness then. We won't have to take birth again as a low-caste person), she says it with the conviction of one who has been well and truly indoctrinated (Bala 2005 : 28). There is none of the doubt, the ambiguity (and therefore, none of the elements of incipient resistance and dissent) that we find in the character of Dholkuram, Shukli and the village chief. There is no this-worldly redemption that the reader can expect then, from the agency claim of characters like *Ghanar Ma*; this is where Manju Bala's text differs significantly from Byapari's. Byapari's story ends with the family leaving the village under cover of darkness. It would be completely wrong to read this as an act of escapism because of two important factors. One, the act of transgressing the village boundary

is itself a taboo as defined by Brahminical discourse, and, therefore, by moving out of the village, the family is issuing a challenge to the Brahmin rulers of the forest kingdom. And two, because just before they leave the village, Maniram disguises himself as a woman, reaches the Linganathan temple and kills Deonandan Mishra.

Yet this does not mean that the possibility of change in Manju Bala's story is predicated upon outside, "from-above" intervention. We note that "Dain", while it features the city-bred Swapna initially as the instrument of change, ends not with her rescue by Prasenjit or any of her city friends. The ritual is stopped, and Swapna rescued, by two young men from the village itself — Kamal and Pabitra. The challenge to Brahminical hegemony, then, for Manju Bala, may rise from within and from below, but it needs a catalyst — and education is what plays the role of the catalyst here. What sets Pabitra and Kamal apart from the other villagers who participate in the ritual and derive pleasure from the spectacle is the fact that they go to college. Had it not been for that, they would perhaps have been merely one of the crowd. It is this very education that gives them a certain degree of immunity from the punishment anybody else would have been doled out for exhibiting the kind of dissent they do. It is precisely because of this education that the dominant Brahmin group finds it impossible to divide and rule, to direct public ire at them: "Pabitra o Kamal dujon college-e pore. Gramer manush order dujonke besh samiha kore. Bhoy-o pay. Oder kono kaj-e tai badha debar sahosh pay na keu-i". (Pabitra and Kamal go to college. The villagers look at them with a certain awe. They fear them as well. Thus nobody has the guts of trying to stop them) (32). What is again striking is the uncanny similarity in the ways Brahminical hegemony is shown to perpetuate itself in both the texts. This is how Malati responds when *Ghanar Ma* tells her of Swapna's suggestions: "*Bari ne jabe mane? Grame tahole akal porbe ni! Tomar ekhar to kheti hobeni, saggoler kheti habe.*" (What do you mean — take it back home? Won't the whole village be struck by famine then? You are not the only one who will suffer; the entire village will be decimated) (29). The comment merely seems to reflect and reiterate the village chief's comments in "Rijab". Perhaps these texts approximate each other so much in the depiction of such arguments and strategies because both authors are trying to document their experiences, direct or indirect, and

because such strategies are integral, even defining characteristics of the exercise of caste-based power dynamics to which their works bear testimony.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. 'Dalit writing' is today considered by many, if not most, Dalit organisations to be synonymous with not just writing about Dalits, but rather with literature focusing on Dalits *and* written by Dalit writers. It is true that some Dalit activists such as Bimal Biswas favour a broader definition of the category, one that also incorporates writing sympathetic to the Dalit predicament even when it emerges from the pen of a non-Dalit (personal conversation with the author; October, 2008). But the Bangal Dalit Sahitya Sangstha and other such organisations working in the field of Bangla Dalit writing today have accepted the former definition and this is quite in keeping with the accepted definition in the Marathi corpus of Dalit literature, concurs Manoranjan Byapari, Bengali Dalit writer (personal conversation with the author; July, 2008). One notes that this marks a movement from the notion enunciated at the first Dalit literary conference organised by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in 1958, where Resolution No. 5, passed at the end of the conference, stated : "...the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit literature...." (quoted from Tapan Bose, "Narratives of Suffering : Dalit Perspectives", in *Translating Caste*, Katha : 2002, p. 184).
2. This is what Sisir Kumar Das has to say about the development of Dalit literature :

'The most significant feature of modern Indian literature in respect of the emergence of the underdogs as a major literary force is what has come to be known as the *Dalit* movement ... It (the Dalit movement) gained momentum around 1920 under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar with the burning of the *manusmriti*, agitation for the right to use ponds and wells reserved for caste Hindus etc. Although Dalit literature, a literature of militant protest against the upper-caste literature upholding Brahminical values, is a post-Independence phenomenon — to be precise it made its impact only in the sixties — its ancestry can be traced in the earlier decades. D Javalkar's *Desaca Dushman* (1926), an essay attacking Chipulankar and Tilak, for which the author was prosecuted by the Brahmins, can be taken as the beginning of Dalit literature.' (from Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956*. New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1995. p. 22).

3. Brajen Mallik, Personal conversation with the author. August, 2008.
4. See Manoranjan Byapari's "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, Number 41, Mumbai : October 13-19, 2007.
5. That is not to say, of course, that a Dalit who writes is a 'Dalit writer' perforce, but rather to suggest that it makes it all the more easier for her/him to share the convictions embodied by authentic experience that would make her/him a conscious and successful painter of caste dynamics.
6. Please see "Literature and Biography" in Rene Wellek and Austin Warren eds., *The Theory of Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, pp. 75-80.
7. Manoranjan Byapari, personal conversation with author.
8. The relationship between caste and class often turns out to be more complicated than may first appear; this relationship may incorporate both identity and difference and it is this ambiguity and flexibility that often makes the mapping of identity such a complicated exercise. In the words of Tapan Basu : "The logic of the caste system is that of an inherited institution of division of labour within the community, sanctified by religion as well as by tradition, which frequently works in tandem with the class schisms of modern, capitalist society, though sometimes the rigidities of caste strata are qualified and modified by the flexibilities within the class structure." (Tapan Basu, "Introduction", in Tapan Basu ed., *Translating Caste*. New Delhi : Katha, 2002. P. XVI)
9. The fact that neither can Dholkuram totally rid himself of the beliefs he has been tutored into harbouring becomes clear in the lines : "*Abahya Manramur kono amangal hobe no to.*" (Surely, no misfortune would befall the disobedient Manram?) (Byapari : 36).

**DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A TESTIMONIAL NARRATIVE:
READING NARENDRA JADHAV'S OUTCASTE**

"Testimonio is usually a one-time affair, a coup in the world of letters"
—George M. Gugelberger¹

Dalit self-narratives are often read as a new kind of literary text that expanded the canvas of life with new sections of population entering the established institutional literary domain. One of the limitations of this approach is to appropriate Dalit self-narrative as a literary genre. What is undermined in this attempt is the Dalit writer's critique of the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies and elaboration of a new set of political questions in the public sphere. Though there are attempts to read Dalit self-narratives as sociological or anthropological texts, the political nature of the genre is not examined. In this context, I wish to consider Dalit self-narratives as testimonial narratives to analyse the public nature of these narratives and the new sites of struggles opened up by this genre. It is my argument here the genre of *testimonio* offers a possibility of radical readings of Dalit self-narratives. I will draw on some of the Dalit self-narratives to make my observations / arguments.

There have been attempts to read Dalit self-narratives as testimonies. M.S.S. Pandian and Pramod K. Nayar read Bama's *Kaukku* as a *testimonio* (Pandian 1998; 2006). Pandian employs *testimonio* as a genre that presents the 'I' as "an agent of collective memory and identity" (131). Drawing on the discussions on *testimonio*, Pandian argues that Bama's *Karukku* changes the divide between literacy and orality, a divide reinforced by Tamil nationalism and mainstream Dravidianism and that it offers a critique of the present oppressive situation. He locates

Karukku in the context of Dalit assertion in the Tamil literacy public sphere. Pramod K. Nayar reads Karukku as a *testimonio* that documents trauma and strategies of survival. He suggests that the narrator Bama functions as a witness to a community's suffering. Recently, Sharmila Rege has presented Marathi Dalit women's self-narratives as *testimonios* (Rege, 2006). She suggests that Dalit self-narratives "violate the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography and create *testimonios* of caste-based oppression, anti-caste struggles and resistance" (14). She emphasizes the view that 'reading Dalit 'life narratives' minus the political ideology and practices of the Dalit movement does stand the risk of making a spectacle of Dalit suffering and pain for non-Dalit readers'. These studies acknowledge the Latin American context of the genre of *testimonio* and draw on discussions on this genre.

I suggest that reading Dalit self-narratives as *testimonios* is an important political move. Does the genre of *testimonio* contest the appropriation of Dalit self-narratives as literary autobiographies? Does the genre open up new ways of reading contemporary questions articulated in Dalit self-narratives in the context of contemporary Dalit movement and its politics of caste and identity? What is important here is to delineate the new insights that the genre offers.

Let me take the question of the appropriation of Dalit self-narratives in literary studies. Autobiography as a literary form has been institutionalized as an authoritative form of 'truth telling.' It deals with the life stories of great men, of highly educated, of experienced and of aged individuals. It upholds the essentialist or romantic notion of selfhood, the expression of a universal human nature. In the Western context, the canonical examples of this form represented the life stories of elite, white, European male.² In the Indian context, the canonical Indian autobiographies are life stories of the Congress nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru. The national self, the central theme of these autobiographies is the elite, upper caste, and male self.³ The Dalit person has no social, educational and cultural status to enter the institutionalized domain of literary autobiography.

With the emergence of Dalit literary movements in the 1960s, 1970s and later, Dalit self-narratives break the social boundaries upheld by the form of Indian autobiography. An unknown Dalit suddenly writes his/her story and enters the domain of autobiography.⁴ This entry of the

'illegitimate' actors into the literary public sphere shows up the limitations and the exclusive character of Indian autobiography. The other important repercussion of the emergence of Dalit life narrative is the breaking up of the conceptual reification of autobiography as the story of a private self. Dalit life narrative contests the essentialist and a historical nature of the genre and reconfigures it as a social discourse (Poitevin, Punalekar). It breaks up the boundaries of the 'pure' literary autobiography and also the social distinctions that this genre reinforces. Therefore it is important to note that Dalit life narrative is a form of political assertion in the context of Dalit movement in India both in the social and literary domains.

It is in this context of reading Dalit self-narratives as social documents, that we need to move beyond the nationalist and formalist frames of our academic disciplines and re-deploy the genre of *testimonio* in our context.

What is *testimonio*? *Testimonio* as a genre became visible in the 1960s in Latin America when the movements of national liberation as well as women, black, gay and other social movements picked up momentum. It is defined as a key form of resistance literature.⁴ John Beverley suggests, "*testimonio* is located at the intersection of the cultural forms of bourgeois humanism, like literature and the printed book..." (Beverley 1996 : 11) He further argues that "*testimonio* appears where the adequacy of existing literary forms and styles - even of the dominant language itself -- for the representation of the subaltern has entered into crisis" (Beverley 1996 : 6). It is often highlighted that *testimonio* as a genre brought new social groups and communities into the public sphere. Therefore, *testimonio* is "a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative" (Beverley 1996 : 28). While it is true that *testimonio* allows new social groups to speak in public and underlines the failure of the dominant forms of representation, we must note that this form was canonized both in Latin American and Western academia.

Beverley argues that *testimonio* is a distinctive genre and it is *not* oral history / documentary fiction / autobiography (Beverley 1996). He emphasizes that the voice of a real person and his/her point of view is one of the key strategies in the genre. I wish to suggest that the presence of a speaking subject and its negotiations in the present open

up possibilities of democratic negotiation. The speaking subject breaks up the divide between the inside-the outside of the world (disciplines/institutions). In other words, it is the speaking subject that destabilizes the world and the text and creates new sites of struggle and of dialogue. I call attention to this particular aspect of *testimonio* for radical possibilities.

I suggest that *testimonio* as a form offers a possibility to read Dalit life narrative in the context of contemporary Dalit movement and its concerns. Both *testimonio* and Dalit life narrative are products of new social movements. These genres bring the new subjects into the public domain. Most of the authors of Dalit self-narratives are not literary persons. They are Government employees such as school teachers, clerks and officers who were influenced by Dalit movement. Suddenly they emerge as writers, activists and thinkers. Reading Dalit self-narratives as *testimonios* enables us to focus on the sudden emergence of Dalit persons as writers and their negotiation of identities in the public domain. It was in the 1960s and 70s, that Marathi Dalit writers brought caste and Dalit identities into the public domain for discussion. In the 1990s, we find an elaboration of what I call Dalit politics of caste at the national level following massacres of Dalits and the Mandal controversy (Kothari). It must be noted that the urgency to speak and write in public is a self-conscious performative act of Dalit persons in the political climate of contemporary Dalit self-assertion movements. The very act of writing / speaking in public brings Dalit persons into the public sphere as writers, activists and intellectuals. How does one explain this phenomenon?

I

I will start my discussion with Limbale's *Akkarmashi* and then Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* as representing two movements in the history of Dalit self-narratives (Limbale, 2003; Jadhav, 2003).

Limbale's *Akkarmashi* is addressed to the middle class upper castes and Dalits and it jolts their complacency. It narrativizes not only pain and humiliation but also the violence involved in the very constitution of identity. It exposes the respectable Marathi literary establishment. It has been argued that *Akkarmashi* problematizes the view that identity

is based on just collective experience and contests the stable ground of identity formation by raising questions of lineage, descent and legitimacy. Let me quote Limbale :

My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go back any further. My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother, landless. I am an *akkarmashi* (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate... I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable, as a half-caste, and as an impoverished man. There is a Patil in every village who is a landowner. He invariably has a whore. I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore. High-caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me, calling me *akkarmashi*. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority. And this book is a tale of this burden. (Limbale, 2003 : ix-x)

What is striking in Limbale's narrative is its exposition of the close link between sexuality and caste hierarchy. Limbale foregrounds his matrilineage and contests the patriarchal law through the assertion of his identity as 'akkarmashi'. He problematizes the privileging of bourgeois family and marriage in the mainstream Indian literatures and presents the oppressive side of these institutions.

Perhaps, it is for the first time that the problem of *akkarmashi* appears in the literary public domain. Dalit scholars have demonstrated the failure of Indian literatures to address questions of caste identity and oppression. What is more, the identity and experience of being an *Akkarmashi* is a hidden and suppressed problem in the respectable academic domain. Scholars have pointed out that the Indian Social Sciences such as Sociology and Anthropology failed to address questions of caste inequality (Guru, Deshpande). The nationalist legacy of our disciplines and the upper caste dominance of our academia among other issues have contributed to this failure.⁶ The new subjects such as *akkarmashi* posit 'authentic experience' of life and debate questions of equality, oppression and identity formation outside the disciplinary boundaries of academia. They reject the mediation of the upper caste

intellectuals citing their failure to address questions of identity and caste politics.

Limbale is breaking silence on an aspect of life that defies representation in the mainstream knowledge systems. He discusses the reactions of his Dalit mother, upper caste Patil father and Dalit community (Limbale, 1999). All of them were upset for making such delicate matters like inter-caste sexual relations a matter of public debate. Limbale's mother was angry for his insulting her in public. His Patil father sent death threats. His entire village was turned against him for destroying the prestige and respect of their village. His friends and Dalit activists opposed his life narrative on the ground that it would reproduce the dominant stereotype of Dalit women as whores in the act of writing the life of his mother. But Limbale decides to write his story not only to make society feel guilty but also to establish that his mother is not an adulteress but a victim of the social system. He asks :

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar; hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. [He is] My grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who *am* I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected? (Limbale 38-39)

Limbale, a real person, is speaking to the public — the Patils and the Dalits of Maharashtra. The English version of *Akkarmashi* addresses the middle class of the upper caste and Dalits in the nation. The text of Limbale's narrative is not 'a self-contained', closed literary document. The implied public in this narrative is not just Marathi / Indian literary public. The book generates a stormy debate beyond the literary domain in the family of Limbale, of the Patil in his village and in Dalit and upper caste communities in the village and outside. The question 'who *am* I?' raises a related set of new questions of lineage and descent and of caste and sexuality. These questions are considered 'personal' and

'private' matters. *Akkarmashi* stages these as public issues and addresses them to the larger society.

Limale's urge to speak and assert in the public was enabled by the powerful Dalit movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Maharashtra. The narrative voice in *Akkarmashi* is that of a speaking subject who is 'real' and 'active' in negotiating contemporary questions. Limale narrativizes his experience of his identity as an 'akkarmashi' by foregrounding his political identity as an Ambedkarite and as a Dalit. The presence of the new actors, often ordinary persons, as 'the real' agents and their re-enactment of 'events' / 'experiences' of everyday 'real' life in a given time and space evokes immediate reactions from those who share this 'real' life. This representation of 'real' life has caused innumerable controversies surrounding the self-narratives. The presence of 'the real' and the invoking of veracity' and 'authenticity' in these narratives offer possibilities of addressing new questions and of opening up new sites of struggle outside the domains of the academic disciplines and the social order.

The problem of 'illegitimate' identity is a new site of struggle that can only be addressed outside the domains of academia and of the new Dalit public. The official domain of the national modern public does not allow one to speak as one of a caste or a tribe.⁷ Dalit self-narratives are *testimonios* in the sense that they open up new sites of struggle and allows for critical contestations of the readers outside the authorised public sphere. The logic of memory, in these narratives, breaks the linearity of time and underlines the immediacy and contemporaneity of caste experience.⁸ It is important to note that *Akkarmashi* generates guilt in the upper caste readers and embarrasses the Dalit middle class readers. (Limale, 2004 : 125). One of the most interesting repercussions of this narrative is to accept Limale, an ordinary person, both as a Dalit as well as a successful writer. What this success of *Akkarmashi* highlights is the potential of Dalit self-narratives in the social process of democratization of the society and of the Dalit community.

II

It is often assumed that *testimonio* is a democratic and revolutionary cultural form. I suggest that there is nothing inherent in the form to

more of a radical form outside time and space. The decision of Cuba's Casa de Americas to offer a prize in this category in 1971 placed *testimonio* in the canon of Latin American literature. In this canon, *testimonio* is a form that presents 'Latin American or Caribbean reality' and it should be a 'reliable' narrative of 'literary quality' involving 'qualified witness' and 'reliability' (Beverley 1991). This attempt to institutionalize *testimonio* as a literary form makes it a disciplinary form that undermines its radical character. I wish to emphasize the dual character of *testimonio*, as it does not uphold one kind of radical democratic politics. It is too simplistic to suggest that *testimonio* interpellates individuals to identify with a popular cause and therefore, it brings together social groups in extending solidarity to popular struggles. This view valorizes *testimonio*. However, one could still argue that *testimonio* has a potential to engage with the immediate and the new questions that find no representation in the institutional domain. However, one cannot presuppose the politics of this engagement. One such example is Dalit representations of caste identity and global modernity in Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir*.⁹

Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* articulates new forms of caste identity and Dalit human rights within the processes of the 'global mobility of caste' and the new forms of a global modernity. My argument here is that *Outcaste* constructs a new Dalit identity, a cosmopolitan identity that drives the story of transformation. Jadhav claims that it is also a story of the social transformation of India. This conception of Dalit identity is at the heart of the new historical project of Dalit emancipation in the era of globalisation. I am also suggesting that this new identity and the project of emancipation structured around it are shaped in the context of globalisation of the caste question in the 1990s, and the global discourse on human rights. Such discourse in the 1990s, often referred to as "Durban discourse" because it is most fully exemplified in the presentation of the Dalit case in the U. N. Conference held in 2001 in Durban, reworked the conception of caste as a particularism of India and represented it as a universal category on par with race. Jadhav's *Outcaste* counterposes his cosmopolitan identity to a caste identity tied to the nation. His critique of caste in the nation is structured by this desire for a cosmopolitan identity. Consequently, he overlooks Dalit engagement with modernity

in the nation-state and celebrates a personally acquired global identity. I am suggesting here this formulation sets up global citizenship as the ideal and the normative – one in which caste somehow just melts away. In his “Author’s Note”, Jadhav locates Dalits in the global context :

Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an erstwhile untouchable, a Dalit. India’s 3,500 year old caste system remains a stigma on humanity. However, Dalits are awakening. They are mounting a slow but steady rebellion. Spearheaded in the 1920s through 1950s, by a western educated champion of human rights, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, whom they regard as saviour. Around 165 million today, Dalits are almost three times the population of the U.K. or France... This is a story of one such family, my own family. (XI)

Locating Dalits in “the world today”, Jadhav compares the Dalit population to that of the populations of other countries in the world, especially in the West. Dalits are presented as Indians in this narrative. The context of Dalit debates on human rights at international forums is evident. The struggle of Dalits and of Jadhav’s own family, in this narrative, is a struggle for human rights. The champion of this struggle is a western educated intellectual Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. What is striking in this story is the evaluation of the Dalit situation in the new paradigm of human rights in the global context. Jadhav inserts the Dalit struggle for emancipation in the 1930s and 1940s in the narrative of the global struggle for human rights. This particular reconfiguration of the Dalit struggle is strikingly new and it attracted wide critical commentary.

I draw your attention to critical comments of columnist and former editor of *the Times of India*, the daily newspaper, Dileep Padgaonkar. He says :

Jadhav’s memoir ... does not suffer from the infirmities of Dalit literature. He chronicles the insults and indignities heaped on his kith and kin with admirable restraint. The rage does not rise to the level of hysteria nor does it ever descend to a stage of self-pity. And even as he exposes, through one telling anecdote after another, the inequalities of the caste system and their devastating effect on the Dalit community, he avoids radical rhetoric. (Padgaonkar)

The suggestion here is that there is a distinction between 'Dalit literature' of the early years 1970s and 1980s and the new Dalit writing after the 1990s. While the early Dalit writers narrated 'the insults and the indignities' with hysterical rage, Jadhav records similar experiences with 'restraint'. In a review in *The Hindu*, a commentator says, while the early Dalit writers 'revisit and relive and horrors of untouchability', Jadhav records 'the horrors of untouchability' as a past and focuses on the 'the destiny' of the Dalit community (Gokhale).

The focus on the future of Dalits in the global context, as the commentator points out, is the theme of *Outcaste*. This reinterpretation of 'caste discrimination' and Dr. Ambedkar's struggle and the insertion of these struggles within the nation for a better life into the narratives of globalisation is a significant move that *Outcaste* makes. The success and celebration of *Outcaste* must be viewed in this context.

The reframing of Dalit struggles as struggles for Dalit human rights and invoking the moral authority of the international community to protect Dalit human rights is very much part of the process of globalisation in the 1990s. The emergence of the new voices of the subaltern groups in the global public sphere beyond the nation-state structures is often seen as a process of homogenisation, more specifically Americanisation. Appadurai and several other scholars have argued that the emergence of the subaltern cultures and the insertion of these cultures into the global culture is not a simple process of correspondence and standardisation (Appadurai). One needs to study the complex interactions of the local, the national and the global cultures and identities. In the Indian context, Dalit activists and intellectuals have actively been participating in the public discussions at the international level. In the 3rd World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (henceforth WCAR) held in Durban in 2001, Dalit activists had argued for United Nations' recognition of caste on par with race as institutionalised forms of discrimination.²² It is at this contemporary moment, that Dalit discourse articulates the language of human rights, particularly Dalit rights as human rights, framing caste and race as comparable forms of human rights violations. Dalit activists redefined caste as a universal form of discrimination. This process is what Kancha Ilaiah describes as 'the mobility of caste.' Both the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) established

in 1998 and the International Dalit Solidarity Network in 2000 facilitated the consolidation of a diverse range of international organizations, institutions and individuals. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* articulates new forms of caste identity and Dalit human rights in the global context.

Damu and Sonu, Jadhav's parents, recount the first two parts of the story of *Outcaste* alternatively. Jadhav and his daughter Apoorva narrate the last parts. All the same I suggest that the narrative point of view in the account as a whole is that of an outside observer. Through Damu's recollection of childhood memories in Ozar, Jadhav presents "the joys" and the atrocities of village life. The account includes a few anecdotes of Damu's childhood. The author's purpose in the portrayal of village life seems to be to highlight the hunger, poverty and suffering of the Mahars. What is striking in this "recollection" is the anthropological mode of representation of village life.

Later, Jadhav's family migrates from Ozar to Mumbai and then to America. In this section, he portrays Jadhav's father Damu's struggles to survive in Mumbai. It was here that Damu becomes part of Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement. Jadhav portrays "the historic events" in Dalit history in some detail to construct Ambedkar as a great leader and to emphasize the consciousness of "human rights" that the Ambedkarite movement generated. During the Mahad Satyagraha, Jadhav tells us Damu sees Ambedkar. Damu recollects

When Babasaheb spoke, everyone listened! He urged the untouchables to do away with the humiliating and enslaving traditions of village times like carrying away dead cattle.

"It is utterly disgraceful to sell your human guts for a few crumbs of bread," he said.

"We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect and gain self-knowledge", Babasaheb said. What touched me the most were his thoughts about raising a family.

"There will be no difference between parents and animals if they do not desire to see their children in a better position than their own." What a man! What a leader! (22)

In this scene, Ambedkar is a modernizer asking the untouchables to give up "humiliating and enslaving traditions." He also emphasizes the values of "self-knowledge" to attain self-respect in society. He also underlines the importance of "human rights" and the raising of the status

of the family. It is crucial to note that in this representation Ambedkar's notion of modernization involves idealization of the middle class family and assertion of "self-help." It is crucial to note here that Narendra Jadhav is suggesting that the making of modern Dalits is a process that has its roots in the Ambedkarite movement in the 1930s and 1940s. One cannot separate the story of Dalits like Damu and Jadhav from the history of the Dalit movement.

In the last section, Jadhav presents the life of the educated and highly accomplished second generation of Damu's family. Jadhav believes that he attains his human dignity through his achievements. Though he is not ashamed of his caste status in the past, he asks for a space as a human being and a citizen, which makes caste identity irrelevant. He inherited the philosophy of his father that a human being is a master of his own will. Jadhav asserts,

If others look down on me in their belief that my caste is low, it is *their* problem, not mine. I certainly don't need to torment myself over it. I pity *them*, for they are the victims of their own obsolete prejudices. (214)

Apoorva locates herself in USA. In her view, caste is a thing of the past and a burden of her forefathers. Apoorva, Jadhav's daughter, claims, "Now, I think, I know who I am. I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion, or caste" (263). Dileep Padgaonkar aptly sums up this point :

...She [Apoorva] has become what her forebears had always aspired to be : just normal people who are neither aggressive nor apologetic about their identity. (Padgaonkar)

This is the theme of Dalit emancipation in the context of globalization. What is significant in this remarkable story is the imagining of a global society and a cosmopolitan Dalit identity. The insertion of the "local" Mahar identity and the "national" Dalit identity into the global Dalit identity is a process that is at work in *Outcaste*. This global Dalit identity acknowledges its past — its "descent", but easily merges into a certain kind of American multicultural identity. As a consequence, the new global identity reproduces Mahar identity as caste identity and village culture as "Indian tradition". In the new hierarchy of

identities, the cosmopolitan identity of Apporva stands for a universal identity.

The interesting aspects of this story are : the narrativization of Dalit life in the village and the representation of Ambedkar in negotiating one's own identity in the project of global modernity. Jadhav, an economist and a staunch advocate of the globalisation of the Indian economy, chooses self-narration as a mode of engagement. Reading this narrative as *testimonio* – the presence of a 'real' voice, narrativizing memory and the new relationship of self and community – are all aspects that reveal a new way of thinking through question of identity and caste. One may not accept the view that village and nation are ghettos of casteism and that global modernity is emancipatory. Jadhav's re-enactment of both the story of the failure of our modernization and celebration of our global modernity makes us troubled and agitated. This is also the critical function of *testimonio*.

[An earlier version of this paper was presented in the national seminar on 'Living to Tell Their Tale : *Testimonio* as a Subaltern Voice in India and Latin America' held on 23-24 March, 2007 at the Centre for Spanish and Latin American Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. I thank Prof. Soniya Gupta for introducing me to this theme and enriching my understanding of Latin America. I also thank all participants for their comments and suggestions on my paper. I also want to acknowledge that I had benefited from my conversations with my students who did my course on Dalit Autobiography in 2004 at CEEL. I particularly thank Shad Naved for educating me through his insightful papers on Dalit self-narratives.]

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Gugelberger (1998 : 63)
2. See Pascal, 1960; Weintraub, 1975 for a discussion on autobiography in the Western context. The canon of 'great tradition' of autobiographical writing : Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* represent life stories of elite, white and male persons.
3. M. K. Naik, a critic and literary historian, writes that the central theme of Indian English autobiography is the representation of self and nation during the nationalist period. (51) Similarly, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar describes the theme of Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) as "the evolution of Jawaharlal's personality in the context of the drama of the national struggle" (303). Given the construction of Indian English Autobiography as a nationalist text that represents the identities of self and the nation, it is not surprising that the autobiographies narrating subaltern identities such as caste, tribe and gender were excluded from the canon of Indian English autobiographies.
4. See Dangle, 1992 for extracts of some of the Marathi Dalit self-narratives. For recent examples in English translation see Bama 2000 : Limbale, 2003.
5. While there are several formal similarities between Dalit self-narratives and *testimonios* such as the emergence of new identities of Dalit castes, women, gay and so on, documenting direct experience, locating the individual in the community, what is significant is the political possibilities opened up by the form of *testimonio*. The absence of an academic mediator is a new feature of Dalit self-narratives. See Beverley, 1991 and 1996; Yudice 1991; Gugelberger 1998; Denegri 2003 for a discussion on various aspects of *testimonio*. I found Beverley's essay "The Margin at the Centre on *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)" most useful.

6. M S S Pandian rightly pointed out, in a recent seminar on Dalit Studies, that our Social Sciences have no language to address questions on humiliation, dignity and self-respect.
7. I have elsewhere argued that Dalits enter modern domains of the nation as castes/tribes highlighting the failure of our public sphere to recognize and accord citizenship to Dalits and Adivasis.
8. M S S Pandian makes this argument very forcefully in one of his unpublished papers.
9. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste : A Memoir (2003)* was based on the Marathi original entitled *Amhi ami auncha Bap (Our Father and Us)* published in 1993. Based on his father's notes, Jadhav, an economist by profession, wrote and published the Marathi version. Then, he re-wrote the book for the English edition, which was published by Viking in 2003. All my references in this paper are to Jadhav, 2003.
10. See for a collection of articles on these debates Thorat and Umakanth 2004.

REVIEW

THE PRISONS WE BROKE BY BABY KAMBLE

Translated from Marathi *Jina Amucha*

by Maya Pandit Orient Longman, 2008.

With an interview of Baby Kamble and an Afterword

by Gopal Guru Rs. 235/-

THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE : A DALIT WOMAN'S MEMOIRS

by Urmila Pawar Translated from Marathi *Aaydan*

by Maya Pandit Stree, 208

With an introduction by Maya Pandit and an Afterword

by Sharmila Rege Rs. 375/-

Despite their significant contribution in the field of Dalit feminist scholarship, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar's self-narratives have so far been inaccessible to the non-Marathi-speaking readers.¹ Maya Pandit's English translation of Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1982) and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) will indeed facilitate locating the establishment of a Dalit feminist standpoint within the canon of feminisms. Given the difficulty of 'carrying across' such culture specific texts to a different culture — be it non-Marathi or non-Indian — the necessity of situating these texts in their proper contexts becomes even more important. The organisation of the books illustrates that Pandit is also conscious about this problem of translation.

Moving beyond the literal meaning of the titles, Pandit has translated *Jina Amucha* as *The Prisons We Broke* and *Aaydan* as *The Weave of My Life : A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. In addition to the author's text and Pandit's introduction, *The Prisons* contains an interview of Kamble with Pandit, and an Afterword by Gopal Guru; and *The Weave* includes an Afterword by Sharmila Rege. While the Introductions familiarise the readers with the context of the

books, the Afterwords raise certain important questions relevant to the study of these texts.

The similarity between *The Prisons* and *The Weave* is that they are both self-narratives of two women accentuating contemporary caste and gender struggles in India. Although both the texts centre on Dalit women and Dalit community, Kable and Pawar's ways of narrating are quite different. Kamble talks mainly about the suffering of her community, the Ambedkarite movement, the Mahars responding to the call of Ambedkar and the community's participation in the Ambedkarite movement, only occasionally picking up the thread of her own life story; while Pawar focuses on her own life story situating it in the context of the Mahar community of Maharashtra and their struggles during the post-Phule-Ambedkarite period.

Jina Amucha makes a significant contribution not only to feminist scholarship, but also to Indian literary history. Although the book is generally said to be an autobiography, it is not exactly an autobiography, but a *testimonio*,² a literary genre most popular in Latin America. It is a Spanish word, which literally means testimony, but the genre *testimonio* has nothing to do with legal testimony. A *testimonio* is narrated in first person, but unlike autobiography, it is not confined strictly to the author's life or hardcore facts.³ On the contrary, a *testimonio* generally gives an account of the life-struggles of a community in general.⁴ In his Afterword to Kamble's text, Gopal Guru raises this very important question --- whether *Jina Amucha* can be called an autobiography. In fact, the 135-page-text by Baby Kamble contains barely a few pages about her own life. She talks about the life of her community, of the Mahars --- their everyday chores; their festivals, rites, rituals; their births, weddings and deaths. Thus her book becomes not an account of her own life, but that of her community --- a *testimonio*. Guru, in the Afterword to Kamble's text, has linked the genre 'autobiography' to the rise of individualism in the 'west', and ascribes the absence of this genre in India to Indian philosophy which does not provide "much scope for celebrating the self." (158) The popular 'western' definition of 'private' and 'public' does not exist in certain communities, where 'private' and 'public' merge into a broader communal life. 'Self' in these communities --- irrespective of their geo-political locations --- is therefore, an inclusive category, and not exclusive. Thus

an individual's 'autobiography' here becomes a biography of the entire community.

This merging of 'public' and 'private' is apparent in Kamble's text. Kamble begins her text with her own life, her childhood days spent with her grandparents. She tells us about her birth, her parents, the community gods, and gradually the focus of the story shifts towards the community, where the presence of the 'self' is hardly distinguishable. And every time the narrator comes back to 'I' within a few lines it becomes 'we'. Clearly, the emphasis is not on the individual self, but on the community in general. Kamble talks about this emphasis on the community in her interview with Maya Pandit. When Pandit mentions that there are scarcely any references to her personal life in her autobiography, Kamble explains, "Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it difficult to think of myself outside of my community." (136). Her oscillation in the text between the self and the community clearly delineates how the 'private' and the 'public' have blended in her life.

The focus of Urmila Pawar's autobiography however, is on the 'self'. She talks about her personal life and her lived experiences. Nevertheless, the community always looms large in her autobiography as well as in her fictions. She admits, "What the writer writes about is social reality, and not his or her individual life!" (230). In the Afterword to this text Sharmila Rege suggests that *The Weave* should be read not as a feminist or Dalit autobiography, rather as "a historical narrative of experience." (328). Pawar's engagement with the individual experience within the community is nothing new. She has worked with Meenakshi Moon, to compile interviews of women who participated in the Ambedkarite movement. In *The Weave* she talks about her own experiences — as a Dalit woman, a Dalit writer, and a Dalit feminist activist — locating herself within the larger socio-political backdrop. The community inevitably creeps into her memories of childhood and school days, her affair with Harishchandra, their marriage, life with her in-laws, her children, how she had to balance her official and familial 'duties' etc. For instance, while talking about her childhood she recalls the women of her village, how they used to live in acute poverty and had to walk the steep path to go to Ratnagiri market, where they would be able to

sell their products and earn some money. By naming her autobiography as 'Aaydan' (which literally means things made from bamboo), Pawar draws a connection between the act of her (his)story spinning and her mother's basket weaving, and thereby acknowledges her debt to her mother, to all these women of her community. In Pawar's autobiography 'private' and 'public' merges in a different way, when she talks openly about certain taboos, for instance, female sexuality, about her frustration on spending the "first night" with Harishehendra. The interface of caste and gender becomes explicit when Pawar tells us about her experience of collecting donations for her organization Samwadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch. She was given five rupees from her boss and was informed by the office peon that, "The sahib gave it because you are a woman." (276).

Both Kamble and Pawar talk in great detail about the position of Dalit women in society, and their active participation in the Ambedkarite movement. Elucidating exactly why and how caste is an integral part of Dalit feminism, and how women act as active agents in introducing changes within their communities, the texts actually show how the 'Dalit woman' emerges as a separate category in the canon of Indian feminism; a category that, to a large extent, has been camouflaged under a rather superficial concept of 'Indian women'. The influence and contribution of Ambedkar becomes clear in both these texts. Kamble grew up when the Phule-Ambedkarite movement was at its peak, and she was exposed to it right from her childhood. She provides us a graphic account of what the life of the Mahars used to be like, and how it changed due to Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Phule-Ambedkarite movement made Kamble more conscious about her caste identity. She learns to question the deprivation that the Dalits have not only endured for ages, but also regarded as their destiny. She acknowledges herself as "a product of the Ambedkar movement." (125). And it is thanks to the movement that she had chance to go to school, to participate in political meetings. In fact, following Ambedkar's advice she started a small business along with her husband, being one of the pioneer women who dared to cross the threshold of her home. But that was only the beginning. Pawar, although writing almost twenty years after Kamble, faces similar problems in upholding her individual identity. Kamble and Pawar each expatiates how not only her identity as a woman, but also her use of

language, and the very food she eats are integrally related to her Dalit identity.

Both these texts provide elaborate descriptions of recipes and cooking processes, revealing culinary art as a caste sensitive factor. Hunger becomes a recurrent motif in both these texts, especially in the narration of the childhood days. Kamble tells us about how the Dalits are forced to survive on dead animals and leftovers of the 'upper' castes. And the fact, that in her village it was her grandmother who first protested against this custom by refusing to eat dead animals, ascertains the active role of women in the movement. Pawar tells us about her curiosity and amusement when she discovered a number of new food items brought by the "upper caste girls" in school. She also explains how these made her even more aware of her caste and poverty.

But I never asked myself the stupid question, 'Why don't we make such dishes at home?' We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly. (94).

Similarly, the language is also tinged by caste, and Pawar exemplifies how the 'brahminical language' can create a barrier among 'Dalits' instead of facilitating communication. The 'upper' caste women generally use the more formal plural form of 'you' of Marathi to address their husbands. Urmila's Tai or sister who was quite familiar with the 'upper' caste culture also used this honorific to address her husband. The marriage, however, did not turn out to be a happy one, and for that Pawar holds responsible this unusual behaviour of her Tai — her imitation of the 'brahminical dialect' — which created a distance between the husband and the wife.

I used to feel so angry about Tai's imitating the Brahmin Godhole family. Using honorifics before the names of husband and in-laws, indeed! Our uneducated illiterate village women were much better. ...I think Tai's use of honorifics created a distance between herself and her husband, which was never there in a husband-wife relationship in our community. (148)

The English translation retains quite successfully Pawar's depiction of language as a class-sensitive factor. Consider, for instance, the following passage :

...I would always listen to their (her classmates') conversation. I came to know so many new words! For instance, some said, 'I have bought "poli" today.' Poli? Then I came to know that they used this word for 'chapati'. I was amused. When I heard someone say 'Dadape Pohe', I was quite intrigued. How can rice flakes be oppressed ('dadape' means beaten or oppressed in Marathi)! Dasara was called Vijaya Dashami in our school but I was so confused when someone referred to 'bhakri' as 'dashmi'! (93)

In fact, the English translations, to a large extent, retain the culture specific words, which, at times, create a little jarring effect, especially in case of *The Prisons*. It has glossed almost all the Marathi words used in the translation. *The Weave*, on the other hand, has fewer glossed words and in most cases culture specific words are translated within the text itself. But end notes at the end of the chapters -- which could have been substituted with footnotes or endnotes at the end of the book -- sometimes disrupt the pleasure of reading.

It is important to note here that while trying to define a 'Dalit self' as opposed to the 'upper caste other', neither Kamble nor Pawar fall into the trap of creating a homogenous 'Dalit self'. On the contrary, their critique of the Dalit community is also prominent in these texts. The texts depict how 'upper' caste people exploit the Dalits, and at the same time, they expound how Dalit men abuse Dalit women. Thus the texts lay bare several layers of hierarchies at once. While Kamble criticises the Dalits' superstitions and habits through her elaborate and recurrent descriptions of the bathing and other such rituals, Pawar shows how the well-off Dalits try to disguise their Dalit identity by changing their titles and imitating the 'upper' caste people. Besides, Kamble and Pawar's own struggle to balance their 'private' and 'public' life -- for instance, how Kamble had to hide her writing from her husband (revealed in the interview with Pandit) or how Pawar had to make sure that she has cooked some tasty dishes before leaving for work -- illustrates how Dalit patriarchy resists Dalit feminism.

While unravelling the very subtle process of cultural hegemony, both Kamble and Pawar actually point out the lack of an effective communication between the "elite women" and the "ordinary women" (Pawar, 2008 : 252). The gap between the so-called mainstream and

the Dalit cultures becomes evident in these texts. Kamble draws attention to the Gandhi versus Ambedkar debate, where, very much unlike his popular image, Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, becomes a representative of the 'upper' castes, while Ambedkar epitomizes the struggle and inherent potential of the Dalits :

The higher caste girls also got together to surround us. They would hurl insults at us. 'That Ambedkar has educated himself, that's why these dirty Mahars re showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, cats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!'

In retaliation, we said, 'You shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar's name! You have your own baldly, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth! That toothless old hugger hasn't any teeth!...' (109)

In the introduction to *The Weaves*, Pandit talks about Pawar's rejection of the Laxmibai Tilak Award, which she was offered for her autobiography. Pawar rejected the award because the programme was scheduled to begin with a prayer to goddess Saraswati. In her letter to the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad Pawar explains her act of rejection bringing up the questions of cultural hegemony that has permeated literatures, "The images and symbols in Marathi literature were born out of a very traditional, fundamentalist fantasy and even today the legacy continues. These values destroy the self-confidence of human beings and drag them towards some abstract, deceptive, imaginary power." (xxvii) Thus Pawar actually reveals the gap between Dalit scholarship and 'mainstream' academia. Whether the publication of the translations of these two very important books in the same year is any indication of a bridging of this gap is yet to be seen.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An excerpt of *Jina Amucha* is available in Tharu & Lalitha (1991), translated by Maya Pandit. Later, Sharmila Rege (2006) has also provided some long excerpts of both these texts, also translated by Pandit. But these are the first English translations of the complete texts.
2. For a comparative analysis of Latin American and Indian *testimonios* and their generic location, see Panjabi (1991-92).
3. The debate rose in the Latin American context when the famous Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú was accused of lying in her *testimonio* by an anthropologist, David Stoll. For a comprehensive analysis of the controversy see Arias (2001).
4. It is in this sense that Sharmila Rege uses the term *testimonio* in her *Writing Caste*. However, she has not explained the term locating it in the Latin American context.

REVIEW

B. KESHARSHIVAM, *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth : A Dalit's Life* (Translated from the Gujarati by Gita Chaudhuri), Kolkata : Samya, 2008.
ISBN 978 81 85604 87 9. Rs. 350. 308 pp.

Dalit life narratives have established themselves as a distinct genre that has emerged from the conflicts as well as creative dialectics between self and society. A critical view of the genre of autobiography reveals a recent trend — of the representation of fragile and vulnerable selves seeking an anchor in the social sphere, and finding it in the very act of writing. The 'self-centered' discourse of autobiography became a dominant form in the post-Enlightenment period because of its transactions with other narrative modes similar to the personal novel and the lyric poetry. Alternative traditions of autobiographical writings, which were earlier not recognized as literary as they did not narrate normative selves, are now much lauded by feminists and Afro-American critics undergoing transformation in the face of prevailing forces of social oppression, and therefore is to be perceived as a dynamic notion. The subject in Dalit life narratives is often an individual among many with shared experiences of cultural ostracism, physical repression and social stigma, the result being that he/she is kept out beyond the legitimate boundaries of human society.

A reading of *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* enables the reader to experience the ways in which genre boundaries can be violated by depleting the 'I' — an outcome of bourgeois individualism — and by replacing it with the collectivity of the Dalit population. Relations between society and the individual, and the private and the public, are problematized by conceiving of the self not merely in private or personal terms. It resists the codes that underscore the productions

of subjectivities in society, and demands new modes of narration and signification. It can be observed that what is represented is not the journey of an individual articulation, sensation and realization but rather of a collective and community-based chorus of voices.

The Whole Truth is a life story about its author's childhood, growing up as an untouchable, the heroic struggle that he waged to survive the ordained life of physical and mental persecution, and his transformation into a speaking subject. It is about the persona that was compelled to internalise patterns of cultural denunciation and social subalternity. In this book, B. Kesharshivam becomes a chronicler of the oppression he endured not only as an individual, but also as a member of a stigmatised and oppressed community. The first part of the book 'Growing Up' deals with the author's childhood memories while in the second one 'At Work' there are reminiscences of his service life in government offices, mostly in the state of Gujarat. During his period in service he realized that there were two ways to show one's performance in a job — to work hard and to keep the boss happy. He came to know how people perfected the second method. The author proposes to write about this issue in *The Bitter Truth*, the sequel to *The Whole Truth*. The tone of *The Whole Truth* is fixed in the beginning itself where the author dedicates the book "To those children who / In coal mines, soot, and ash, / Furnaces and masonry... / Bathe in the dust of sand, lime and cement, / And carry the stinking leather from the tanneries, / The worn-infested bones from the bone mill; / And / In the modern social order - / In hotels, schools, hostels / And in the abode of the pseudo-religious / Become a victim of abuse, / And under the shadow of / Pain, misery, vulnerability, endurance- / Breathe, writhe..."

Kesharshivam has produced three novels in addition to a number of collections of short stories and essays. *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* provides the reader the themes and background of many of the creations of its author. Titles of his novels like *Shool* (Thorn), *Mool Ane Dhool* (Roots and Dust) remind readers the titles of dalit narratives like Bama's *Karukku*, Omprakash Valimiki's *Joothan*, Laxman Mane's *Upara*, Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* etc. that communicate the excruciating pain and bitterness of the author's lives. The issue of acceptance of Dalit writers by those who belong to the mainstream has been pointed out by Kesharshivam. He mentions that there was a

discussion for six months whether his first short story 'Rati Rayan ni Ratash' (The Anger of a Beautiful Woman), which was written mostly in Dalit dialect, should be published at all. 'Tremendous courage is needed to create Dalit literature', he declares. He observes that Dalit literature is a product of various imprisonments - the imprisonment of untouchables, of speech, of knowledge and hence claims that 'Dalit literature means prison literature.'

One of the first things that strikes the readers of *The Whole Truth* is the dehumanizing impact of caste oppression in society. The author documents his struggles against caste-violence, deprivation, discrimination and poverty. This routinized violence of everyday existence is described in many Dalit life narratives. These narratives must be treated as *testimonios*, as they are eye-witness accounts of atrocity, and document trauma as well as strategies of survival. They claim the right to speak for as well as beyond the individual, and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, trauma and struggle. Here the aim is not merely to achieve literariness, but even more so to communicate the pain, struggle, oppression, and angst, as well as spirit and agency of the members of a community. The writers experience their ordinary selves not as a unified whole which is in harmony with its surroundings but in a constant state of conflict with the power structures established by the caste hierarchy.

Dalits claim their selves chiefly as members of their community, and through confrontations with a given system of subjugation; therefore community identity is primary in their perception of the self. In *Autobiography as Activism : Three Black Women of the Sixties* Margo Perkins explores the politics of story telling for activists of the Black Power movement and presents some expectations from the genre which she calls 'political autobiography'. She anticipates that the autobiographer will accentuate the story of the struggle over her own personal sufferings; that she will use her own experience both to record a history of the struggle and to promote its political agenda; that she will provide a voice for the voiceless; that she will resort to strategic reticence to protect the integrity of the struggle as well as the welfare of other activists; that she will expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state; and that she will use the autobiography

as a form of a political intervention, to school as wide an audience as possible to the situation and concern at stake. With the purpose of social intervention Dalit literature too carries strong militant connotations. Arun Prabha Mukherjee asserts that Dalit autobiographies, far from being 'sob stories', are powerful narratives of anger against injustice. Beyond challenging hegemonic values, narratives by American Black Power struggle activists also advocate and model transformative action. Their writings emphasize the value and importance of bringing together theory with practice. Events and actions in Kesharshivam's life also reverberate with echoes of Ambedkar's mantra : 'get educated, get organized and then revolutionize', of his call of making a difference in the lives of Dalits. It is worth noting that many events of *The Whole Truth* have been described through the eyes of a child and the militant and resistant tones are mitigated here.

Guy Poitvin has highlighted some of the driving motives in Dalit writers' works. The first drive, Poitvin notes, is the determination of the oppressed to denounce the culprit and to proclaim faith in the liberation movement launched by Ambedkar. The second one is the will to narrate one's social history, to record the past as a document of the history of their society and mankind in general, to present a precise testimony and show in detail how they have been oppressed. Self-assertion; seeking the status of human being; belief that education is their saviour; reassessing and reappropriation of past for an alternative history for further struggle; construction of identity through relentless militancy; projection of social, political and welfare activities; painfully rooting out the memory of trauma of ancestral humiliation etc. are the various motives to write Dalit autobiographical narratives. Recalling the atrocities of the yesteryears is as painful as experiencing the real agony. Kesharshivam was constantly plagued with the question : "What was the point in remembering the painful past?" He writes :

In my childhood I had been beaten up often because I was an untouchable. The physical wounds like the blow on my hand healed over a period of time. However these blows might have been, they could be treated, but for the deep wound inflicted on one's heart there is no medicine except death! When I remember the incidents

I shed tears of blood and every pore of my body burns in a fierce fire!⁴

He says that "I feel in one life I have lived many lives and that is why I have taken the liberty of writing this autobiography and narrating the stories of my many selves." He inverts an old saying in the introduction of his book *Shool* (Thorn). "Instead of saying 'though the snakes have disappeared but their traces remain', I have stated 'the traces have been erased but the snakes remain.'" The title of Nanasaheb Jhodge's autobiography *Pricking Thorn, Phanjar*, indicates a tree with thorns which are very sharp. If someone walks barefoot and happens to step on them their feet are sure to bleed, and the wounds sure to become painful, "as if bitten by scorpions". The thorn remains deep inside and continues to cause pain. The title of Bama's autobiographical novel *Karukku* too connotes pain and trauma. *Karukku* is the saw-edged palmyra leaf which has become the embryo and symbol that grew into the book. The author has compared her own life with this sharp leaf that sears readers too with its edges. The author of *The Whole Truth* also reveals before his readers that "All my life I have had to walk on the sharp edge of the sword." Bitter experiences of trauma, anguish, pain, suffering and atrocities are there in the mind of creators of the corpus called Dalit literature, and therefore the writer of *The Whole Truth* writes elsewhere :

If you were to knock on the words of pain, you would hear the sound of truth; if you were to press the words, you would find drops of perspiration oozing out; and if you were to dig into them, you find blood streaking out.

In spite of being a document of collective trauma and struggle there is no dearth of humour and pathos related to the author's personal life in *The Whole Truth*. Narratives of his parents and other members of family, his failure to marry his love because of her upper caste origins, satisfaction in marital life, tension in his second marriage — all have found place in the book.

Her (his first wife) laughter reflected pure happiness that a happy marriage had provided. I too often remember her statement, 'I'll never ever leave you'. And yet she left me forever half-way through our journey of life.

Other incidents also enrich the text, such as that of an old woman who stamped the ballot paper five times to compensate for all the times that

she had not cast her vote; of a teacher who turned the classroom into his residence; a BDO who suffixed *Paramhansa* (the enlightened one) to his name. Such stories provide 'comic relief' in these narratives of pain and suffering. Incidents of Dalit conspiring against Dalit, events and practices typical of government offices, the author's sincerity and devotion to duty, and the social lives of the Dalits, all find expression symmetrically in the narrative with simultaneous undercurrents of anguish and pain.

Kesharshivam calls his book, the first Gujarati Dalit autobiography, *Purnasatya : The Whole Truth*. The challenging title brings to the fore a comparison with Mahatma Gandhi's *Satya na Paryogo (My Experiments with Truth)*. While in Gandhi's autobiography the site of the self is that of relentless self-examination, and of a rigorous trial of self against a certain set of values, in Kesharshivam the humiliation meted to the self pre-empts any quest of "true" self and depicts instead the violations of social and moral codes. It had been suggested to Kesharshivam that he name his book *Shaishavni Sarane* (On the Grinding Stone of Childhood), but he chose not to sue it, since, he claimed, not merely his childhood but his entire life had been lived out on a grinding stone. He essays to demonstrate Gandhian simplicity in his style of writing. In the introduction of his autobiography he says :

Gandhiji had urged people to use simple language : one that even a *koshiyo* (a farmer who waters his field using a *kosh* or leathwer pouch) can understand ... I've tried to follow his advice and have attempted to write in such a way that even the marginalized girl in the society is able to understand it!

To express the truth of his life he uses simple sentence with unembellished structure. The loss of local dialect and registers through the process of translation is inevitable. However, the consolation is that this volume has become accessible to a larger reading public, on which it is sure to have an impact.

Priced reasonably and produced wonderfully, the book can be a valuable addition to both personal and institutional library collections.

